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I'll admit, I'm something of a *Mass Effect 3* ending apologist. It really didn't bother me. No, that's not correct; it bothered me greatly, but I enjoyed being bothered. That ending, the consequences of that final choice, sat with me for days after finishing the game. There are few videogames I can think of that have had a similar impact on me.

Was it a cathartic, satisfying way to end the trilogy? Perhaps not. However, it left me with philosophical questions and issues to ponder. It left me to think about the journey I had taken from all the way back in 2007 and whether it had been worth it. If anything, I actually appreciated the journey more, because getting to that moment was more important than the moment itself.

And so when it turns out that everything I had done didn't necessarily amount to much in the final confrontation and reveal of what Shepard's journey had been all about, from Prothean beacon to Crucible, the choices made along the way had to stand own their own merits, not as paths towards a desired endgame. I may have been in a minority, but I appreciated that. I appreciated that BioWare was brave enough to go that dark and deep.

I'm not expecting anything similar from *Mass Effect: Andromeda* after everything that was said and done following *ME3*, but I will always have faith in this team delivering a story like no other. And now, set in a galaxy far, far away, the possibilities are greater than ever.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




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LIFT


PARTY
BUNGALOW BAR
POLICE

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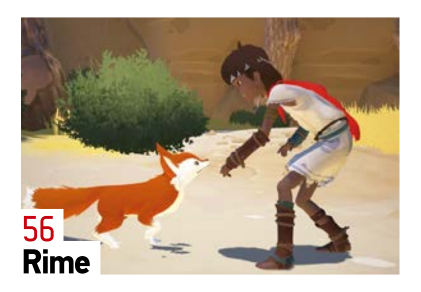


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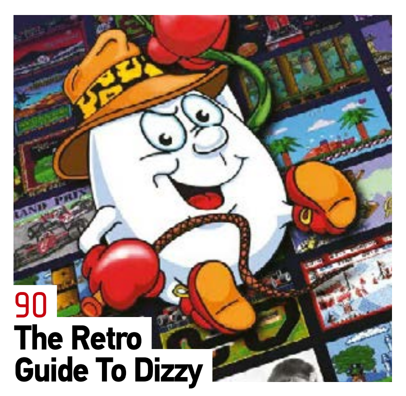
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MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA

We explore Bioware's new game to see how its evolution of class, combat and mulitiplayer could set a new bar for sci-fi gaming

A NEW HOPE

Scorpio emerges from the shadows

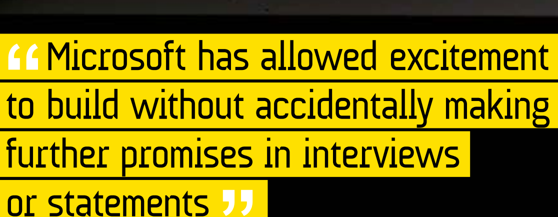
→ Microsoft's new console is breaking cover, but still has much to prove

In recent years, Microsoft has made two attempts at revealing a console. The first came in May of 2013, where president of interactive entertainment business Don Mattrick revealed an Xbox One console that everybody could see was forward looking, but very few wanted. And then, in June of 2015, Xbox division head Phil Spencer revealed a revised, high-end Xbox One console that everybody wanted, but nobody could actually see.

And that, in essence, means that as exciting a prospect as it may be, Project Scorpio is still more of a concept than a reality. The announcement came at a time when Sony was preparing to unveil the upgraded PlayStation 4 Pro and push its affordable (not to mention technically impressive) proprietary virtual reality platform onto the masses. Microsoft had to do something that could turn the tide; Xbox One sales are estimated to be around the 30 million mark worldwide – tracking on a similar trajectory to the Xbox 360 – though the PlayStation 4 continues to break records and expectations as it pulls away to a figure closer to the 60 million mark.

Project Scorpio is supposed to be the answer, boasting upgraded hardware that is powerful enough to run games in native 4K, support 'high end' virtual reality experiences and provide an 'obvious' performance advantage over Sony's equivalent console technology. A cynic would look at this as the beginnings of a new generation cycle without the necessary marketing spend, then; but still it's difficult to muster the excitement or anticipation that Microsoft so desperately wants us to conjure. As we said before, Project Scorpio is still far more conceptual than it is tangible, *believable*.

Because the company was so vague with its announcement of the machine, reeling off a list of impressive (albeit nonsensical) sounding technical specifications





→ EIDOS MONTREAL AND CRYSTAL DYANAMICS ARE WORKING ON A NEW MARVEL GAME

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designed – primarily, we imagine – to bewilder and impress the average gamer, there are still so many reasons to replace anticipation with caution. That is scary in and of itself, considering Microsoft wants Scorpio to be on shelves before the end of 2017, combating an ever-rising tide of PlayStation sales and a Nintendo Switch platform that by late 2017 will boast a line-up including *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*, *Super Mario Odyssey*, *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* and *Splatoon 2* – not to mention the oft-rumoured ports of *Super Smash Bros.*, and *Pokémon Sun & Moon*.

The Microsoft line-up for 2017 is looking, it's fair to say, pretty weak following the cancellation of *Scalebound* and that's piling on pressure for Microsoft to announce enough games alongside Project Scorpio to justify its purchase. *Forza 7* from Turn 10 is a given, but with *Gears Of War* returning last year and 343 Industries likely to be a little too far out to reveal the inevitable *Halo* sequel, there are few returning franchises that could make a legitimate splash on stage at E3 2017. But that's the struggle Microsoft faces with this machine. It needs to find a way to deliver on its Project Scorpio specification promises, it needs to announce a suite of impressive first-party support, clarify its VR intentions *and still* Microsoft will need to anticipate and prepare for any curve ball surprises coming from its closest competitors.

To its credit, Microsoft has done its best to keep quiet since E3 2016 on the subject of Scorpio, allowing excitement to build without accidentally making further promises in interviews or statements. The only developer to break their silence thus far is *Ori And The Blind Forest* director Thomas Mahler, who took to Reddit to go on the offensive, calling out the PS4 Pro as a "half-assed upgrade" whilst talking Scorpio up as a "full-blown next-gen machine" that also happens to be backward-compatible with your current library.

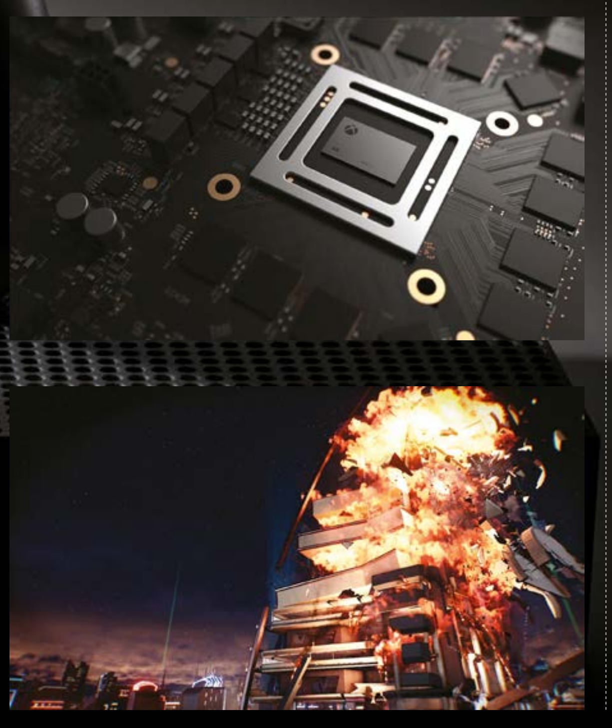
It's these sorts of comments that build excitement, that make us *believe* that Microsoft may actually be able to pull off an incredible turn of fortune. The leak of the Microsoft internal whitepaper entitled 'Reaching 4K and GPU Scaling Across Multiple Xbox Devices', has shed more light on Project Scorpio's planned capabilities. The paper, dated just after the June 2016 reveal and designed to clue developers in on how it should step into 4K-enabled gaming, confirms that there will be no ESRAM support, a quadrupled L2 cache, a six-teraflop GPU with a compute power rated 4.5 times the base-capabilities of the Xbox One and support for impressive memory compression technology.

These are details that, on paper, make Scorpio sound like a legitimate step up – a huge overhaul in a generation that's only just finding its potential. Phil Spencer too has begun taking to Twitter, teasing that he has, "played my first games on early Scorpio unit. Games played great, console looked right, proud of the team." But until we see games running on it, until we see the console and until Microsoft clarifies its intentions with VR, it is merely a great, impressive sounding idea on paper with little to show for it in reality. 2017 is going to be one of the biggest years in the industry's history, and Microsoft has the power to shape or break it.

Below Microsoft's line-up is looking a little light following the cancellation of Platinum Games' *Scalebound*, though the currently MIA *Crackdown* looks set for a huge re-reveal, leaving the cloud behind in favour of utilising Xbox's newfound power.



Below It isn't yet clear whether Scorpio will be able to put Microsoft back into a dominant position in the console race, especially as Sony continues to pull ahead following the release of the PS4 Pro and PSVR.



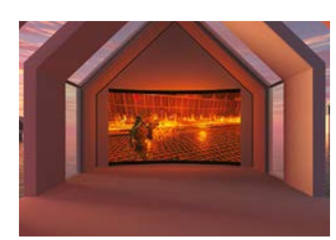
Will Scorpio support VR?

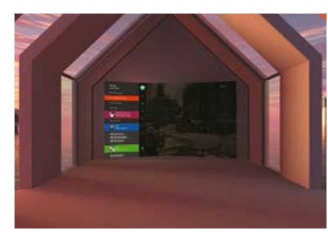
An unusual omission creates rumours and whispers

Microsoft made an unusual and perhaps telling update to its Project Scorpio webpage, omitting any mention of "high-fidelity VR" that had previously featured. Instead, now it simply lists off the other notable talking points – true 4K gaming, six teraflops of power, eight CPU cores and 320 GB of memory bandwidth.

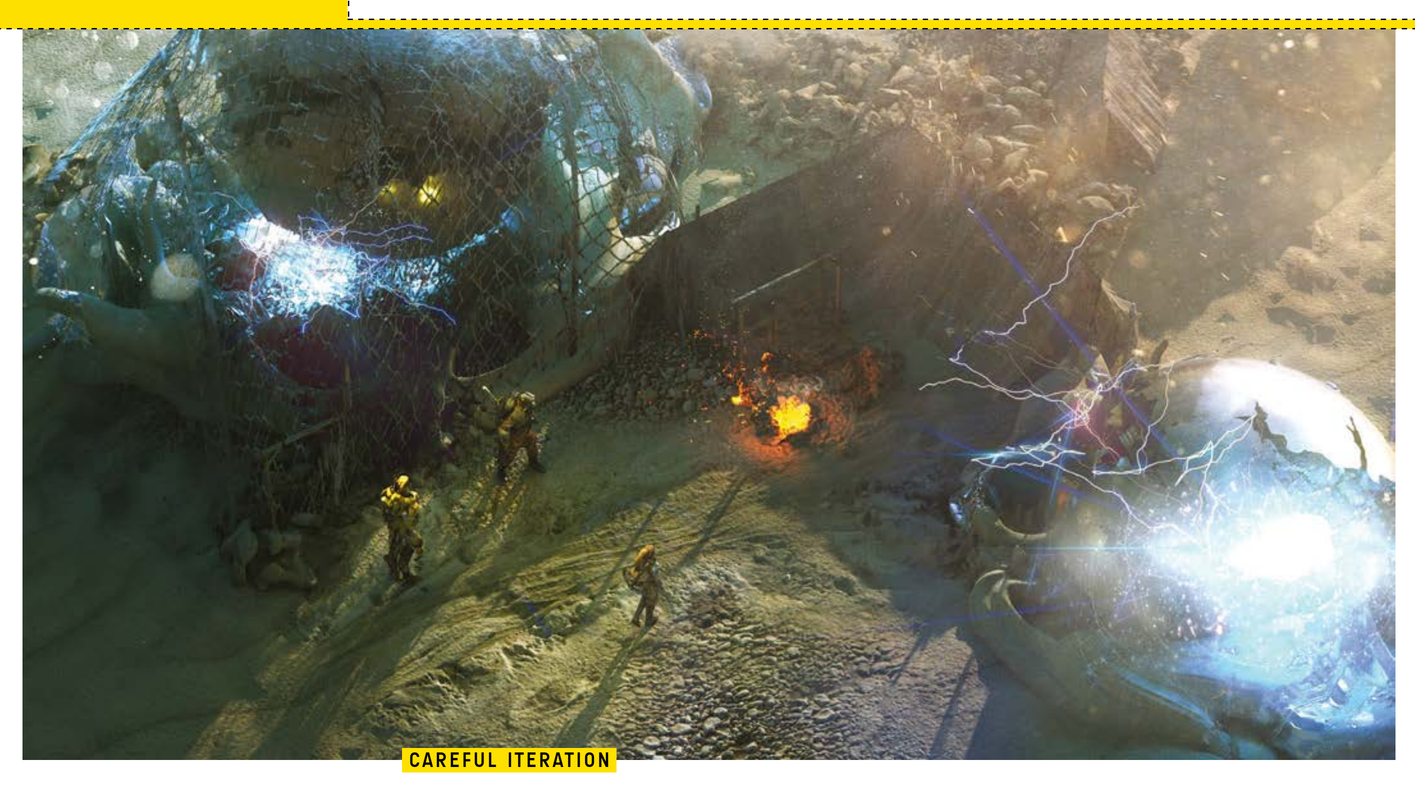
A Microsoft spokesperson has since come out with a statement, reaffirming that "when Project Scorpio ships later this year it will be the most powerful console ever built with a 6 teraflop GPU to deliver true 4K gaming, high-fidelity VR experiences, and greater graphic fidelity," though that's still leaving a lot of questions unanswered.

There's been trepidation in the VR community of late. Sony is still unwilling to release specific sales figures for PlayStation VR, Oculus has been embroiled in a lawsuit with ZeniMax and HTC seems content to push Vive out of the game space and into practical application scenarios such as teaching and training. Could Microsoft have changed its plans? It's certainly possible. While it's likely VR will still have a part to play in Xbox's future, it's this kind of cross-communication that reminds us we should take what we know about Scorpio with a pinch of salt. E3 2016's reveal was what Microsoft would *love* to do, but it'll be E3 2017 where we see what it is actually *able* to do.






OBSIDIAN HAS ANNOUNCED PILLARS OF ETERNITY 2 AND REACHED ITS FUNDING GOAL IN 24 HOURS

CAREFUL ITERATION

Does crowdfunding have a future?

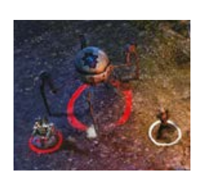
→ Kickstarter may no longer be the lucrative funding platform it once was, but inXile CEO Brian Fargo believes that there is still a bright future for community-driven game creation

In 2012 Kickstarter changed the way in which videogames are pitched, funded and created. That was the year the platform went from niche interest to global phenomenon, successfully aiding in the resurrection of ageing game genres, giving established studios a new lease on life and helping support an independent revolution. Now, just four years later, it looks as if the crowdfunding bubble has deflated; the number of projects being successfully backed is in decline, as too is the average dollar raised for the lucky few that continue to buck the trend.

One such developer is Brian Fargo, CEO of inXile entertainment. Fargo has been behind some of the most successful crowdfunding campaigns in the scene, with *Wasteland 2*, *Torment: Tides of Numenera*, *The Bard's Tale IV* and *Wasteland 3* all made a reality through Kickstarter and Fig.

Fargo is hesitant to suggest that crowdfunding is in decline (for obvious reasons) though he does believe that expectations have shifted significantly in the past four years – potentially making it more difficult for newer developers and studios to make a splash in the saturated scene.

"I would say that expectations are quite different now. If you look at our campaign for *Wasteland 2* [2012], I didn't really show anything of the game; it was just me doing a comedy gig and just talking, you could do that back then. But then you contrast that with *Wasteland 3*, to launch that campaign cost us six figures – to put all those assets together. It cost that to be able to say, 'forget me telling you about this vision and let me show you a little bit more'. I think the expectations are much higher now for making people see the vision of what you intend to do."



It's difficult to pinpoint the exact reason as to why developers need to work harder to earn the trust of backers, but looking at the number of disappointments (Ouya, *Mighty No. 9*) and high-profile products that never saw release (*Allison Road*, *Yogventures*), it's perhaps no surprise that prospective investors are more hesitant to put their money down on a good idea and blind faith alone.

One such sticking point is the shifting of release dates. More often than not, games that have been brought into life through crowdfunding have missed their intended window, that's a state of affairs that tends to anger the community – time to properly make a game be damned, if a release date slips the digital pitchforks come out. There isn't much of a remedy to this – as making games is a creative nightmare of shifting parts – though Fargo believes that being generous with development time is certainly one way enterprising new studios should approach campaigns.

> "I moved the date on Wasteland 3 way out there. I'm hoping that I can beat it and become a superstar"

DATA STREAM → PORTAL DESIGNER KIM SWIFT HAS JOINED JADE RAYMOND AT EA MOTIVE



"I'm trying to think about what people usually complain about but date expectation is always the biggest one. I mean just look at *Wasteland 3*," says Fargo, noting how he set a release date of 2018 on the project when the crowdfunding effort launched in 2016. "I moved the date on that one *way* out there, to the point where I'm hoping that I can beat it and become a superstar."

As you might be aware, Kickstarter is no longer the only platform for crowdfunding videogames. The biggest alternative is Fig – which boasts Fargo, Feargus Urquhart of Obsidian Entertainment, and Tim Schafer of Double Fine Productions on the advisory board – an equity platform where your money (when you put in enough) isn't a glorified pre-order, but an investment where you will see monetary returns on the final product. For the bigger, more successful independent studios, it seems to be the natural environment to launch a game.

"Reward-based crowdfunding [Kickstarter] has certainly been great for us, but it becomes more difficult every year to generate the excitement [and] to get meaningful numbers than it was in 2012 and 2013… unless you're in the board game business, apparently," he says, laughing. "But if we can ship a game and we can make everybody a profit, well, then I could do that for the rest of my life. If we can ship *Wasteland 3* and everybody makes a 45 per cent return, how easy is *Wasteland 4* going to be?" he says, laughing once again. "If we get three million dollars with *Wasteland 2*, those are just pre-sales. If we get three million dollars with *Wasteland 3*, we've got to pay it back plus interest; it's not as profitable but it's more sustainable."

That isn't to say that reward-based backing doesn't still have its positives. Fargo believes that smaller projects and studios are still better off minimising the risk of crowdfunding and heading to Kickstarter. "I don't think one will replace the other.



Above Brian Fargo has been hugely successful with his crowdfunding endeavours, with the resurrection of the *Wasteland* franchise being a notable success story.



Above Fig launched, not as a rival of Kickstarter, but an alternative. Backers aren't glorified pre-order holders, but actual investors, likely to make a profitable return on the game when it sees release.

There are definitely different dynamics that will apply to each one [and] it all depends on how much you need the money too. Things will change and set in place as more experimentation is done, but we may find out that the average Fig campaign is higher because people have made good returns.

"One of the guys who is on the advisory board is part of the Indie Fund and what excited me when he talked about the investments they made – and they tended to be smaller projects, $25,000 to a $100,000 or so – he told me they made money on every single one, they were all profitable," says Fargo, noting that while this is compelling information it's still early days for Fig, especially as the platform still isn't in a position where it can reveal its average returns.

"But I think that when that starts happening we might find out that, okay, if you go to Kickstarter as an unknown developer your average is X, but with Fig your average is X + Y but you have got to give the money back [to investors] and so people could start to make an analysis of what model they prefer."

Fargo is clearly a huge supporter of crowdfunding. It has allowed him and a number of other studios to create freely without publisher interference. It has given them the scope to create niche games that audiences had been crying out for. It has also allowed studios to drop any hesitation about sharing ideas and helping each other out even if their games would appear to be competitors.

"A huge part of this crowdfunding atmosphere is that it has brought developers all together, closer than we have ever been before. I work with everybody, whether it's Obsidian or Harebrained Schemes, Larian Studios or ArtCraft Entertainment, you name it, we are cross-promoting each other across our social media feeds, through our campaigns, we back each other's projects significantly. We will be $10,000 backers, $100,000 backers. We don't see each other as the competition; the real competition is the big guys, it's Bethesda and Activision, those are the guys that have real market share – we are rounding errors compared to those guys."

The future of crowdfunding is unclear, but so long as a studio has a good idea and the means to bring it to life in a timely fashion, there's no reason why it won't continue long through the current generation cycle. For now, the likes of Kickstarter and Fig continue to fill the void that they always have, they bring games to life that the bigger publishers are too afraid to touch, and the worth of that is simply unquantifiable.

Managing expectation

→ Crowdfunding still has its drawbacks

While crowdfunding has been hugely successful for a handful of studios, it isn't without its problems. As Brian Fargo maintains, when you involve the community in the funding process, fans can have a tendency to become devoutly involved in the development process – often to a fault.

"I think the drawbacks are that you're going to show things early and you're going to want feedback and you'll always worry that people will jump on it. That they will say 'oh, but this doesn't look great' and they will start reacting to stuff – they get a taste of negativity – and then you have to say 'no, no, no that's why we're showing it to you!

"In all entertainment you try and protect your children away from any harsh light while they are still in development, that's why you don't want a negative buzz to get going on it so it can have the optimum chance when it launches. So I think that's the biggest risk… that you want to get feedback but you don't want people thinking that this is how it's going to look. Most people are reasonable. There will be some that will make demands upon us, but I'm used to coming from a publishing atmosphere where when a publisher makes a demand and you don't agree with it or think it's a bad idea or make the product worse it doesn't matter, because they can withhold funds and force it. Whereas with the fans you can have a big debate but they can't force you, and normally the right ideas will emerge on top because it will start a discussion, everybody will weigh in and logical heads prevail. It doesn't come down to one person who has decided on something. For us, it's a healthier, creative atmosphere."



 UBISOFT HAS BOUGHT DJ HERO DEVELOPER FREESTYLE GAMES FROM ACTIVISION 

PLAY YOUR CARDS RIGHT

How does Halo resemble 16th-century feudal Japan?

→ Creative Assembly explains why it was so quick to jump at Halo Wars 2

It's been a busy and critically-acclaimed few years for Creative Assembly and as the premier real-time strategy studio in the world, it makes a lot of sense that 343 Industries would look to bring the team in on a return for *Halo Wars*, but why did the Horsham-based developer want to do it?

"We're big fans of the *Halo* universe and huge fans of the first game, which was fantastic. It just felt like a really amazing opportunity to pick up the story of these characters that are really loved and tell the next chapter of their adventure," creative director Alistair Hope tells us as *Halo Wars 2*'s release looms large. But it's a tough proposition to make RTS work on consoles at the best of times, let alone one based on one of the most beloved sci-fi franchises in gaming.

For Creative Assembly the key was finding a familiar methodology it could lock into. "No matter what we're working on, I think you can see there's a great attention to detail and a desire for authenticity, whether it's the historical reality or the fantasy of *Warhammer* or *Alien Isolation*, trying to recreate a certain sense of a film from over 30 years ago, or *Halo Wars*," Hope explains. "I think the approach is very similar to those, staying very true to the source material, really deeply understanding it and then building upon it and putting it back into the hands of fans, and that's true no matter what we're working on."

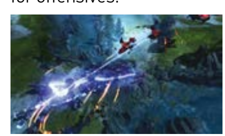
And a real breakthrough, as those who have already enjoyed *Halo Wars 2*'s beta can testify, has been the creation of Blitz, the game's fast-paced, card-based game mode. In attempting to find a way to make real-time strategy accessible enough for all *Halo* fans to enjoy, the team may have just hit upon the game's killer addition. "Streamlining the experience, changing the focus away from base building and tech levelling and replacing the units with cards; it's actually quite a natural, straightforward shorthand," Hope tells us. "The idea that you can build an army offline, outside of the pressures of the moment-to-moment combat and then take it onto the field. Play is really exciting, but with short games. And then you kind of think, 'These cards are great, but that one I'm not really using', so you go back to the deck manager and sort it out. I think for the beginner it's great because you just pick your favourite units and toys, but the experienced player can think about how you can create some really dynamic and interesting decks."

Quick Blitz Tips

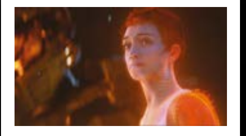
→ Some important lessons we learned playing Halo Wars 2



ENERGY IS KEY
Each card expends energy to play. More powerful units, particularly end-game units that can really shift the balance of a match require lots of it. Nippy units to go around and grab drops are good to have early in order to power up for offensives.

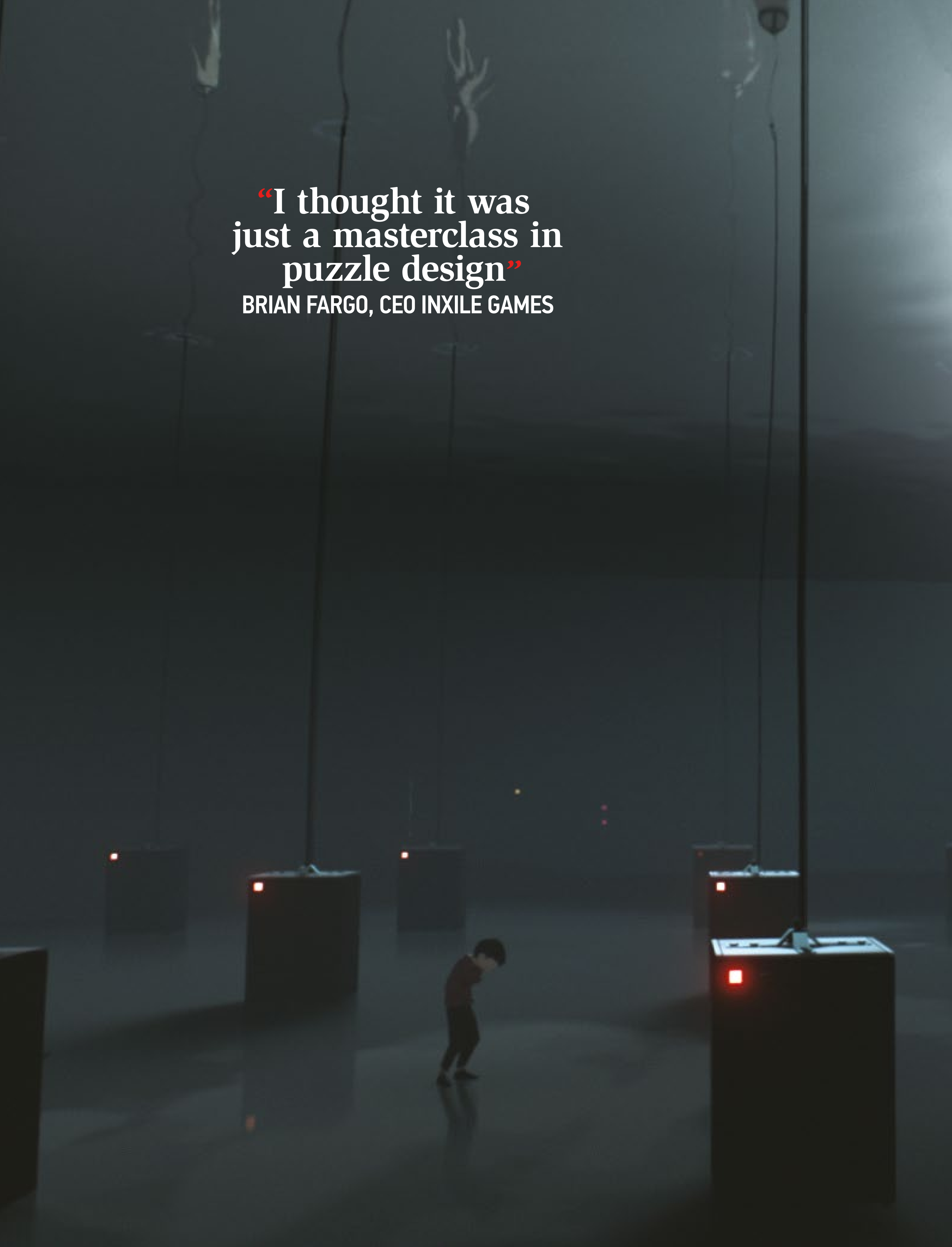


KEEP MOVING
Holding control points is fine, but it can sometimes be just as effective (particularly when looking to build up energy for powerful cards in your deck) to keeping mobile, taking and losing points in the early game and then holding down your positions later on.



CUSTOMISE YOUR DECK
Heroes in the game come with default decks but you can make your own, and if you have regular teammates you can think about balancing with them. As Creative Assembly suggested to us, you could build low-energy decks for quick map control and a heavy deck for end-game domination.

DATA STREAM → TEKKEN 7 HAS BEEN CONFIRMED FOR LAUNCH ON PS4 AND XBOX ONE 2 JUNE 2017



> "I thought it was just a masterclass in puzzle design"
>
> **BRIAN FARGO, CEO INXILE GAMES**



WHY I ♥...

INSIDE

BRIAN FARGO,
CEO INXILE GAMES

I just played Inside *and I loved it. I thought it was just a masterclass in puzzle design; I love the way they wove the puzzles into the environments. It's interesting in the way that they put it together. When I failed at a puzzle I always blamed myself for not figuring it out, which is key, and then it just went into the most strange territory imaginable at the end – I just loved the creativeness of it.*

It was just little things, like the way they use lights... and those dogs! When you saw those dogs running, your heart just starts beating, it was pretty intense! There was a little puzzle where I had to lure the dog and jump in the water, swim underneath him and come out the other side and I just loved that entire sequence, it was great. It was great drama mixed with a very clever puzzle. I really appreciated all the little moments in that game, I was never bored. I think Inside *is the most satisfying game experience I have played recently.*

Super Mario Odyssey

CONCEPT ■ An open-world *Mario* game, similar to *Super Mario 64*, but alongside all the fantastical worlds, it's also set in a city. With real humans.

If they get it right, Odyssey could be Sunshine meets Galaxy

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Switch
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: Q4 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Nintendo hasn't published a *Mario* game like this one since the GameCube's *Super Mario Sunshine*, where Mario jumped into magical graffiti to access new, self-contained worlds. Before that, it was *Super Mario 64* – same concept, but instead of graffiti it was paintings. Who knows what it will be this time?

Developer History

Super Mario 64 **1996 [N64]**
Super Mario Sunshine **2002 [GameCube]**
Super Mario Galaxy **2007 [Wii]**
Super Mario Galaxy 2 **2010 [Wii]**

High Point

Super Mario Galaxy is widely regarded as the high point for 3D *Mario* platforming, with a stellar soundtrack as well as tight, beautifully-designed levels.

They say 30 is the new 20. They also say 40 is the new 30, and 50 is the new 40, and perhaps we should be concerned about whether or not these people understand numbers, but the point is this: if you think you're confident and put together at 20, just wait a decade and you'll be surprised at how wrong you were.

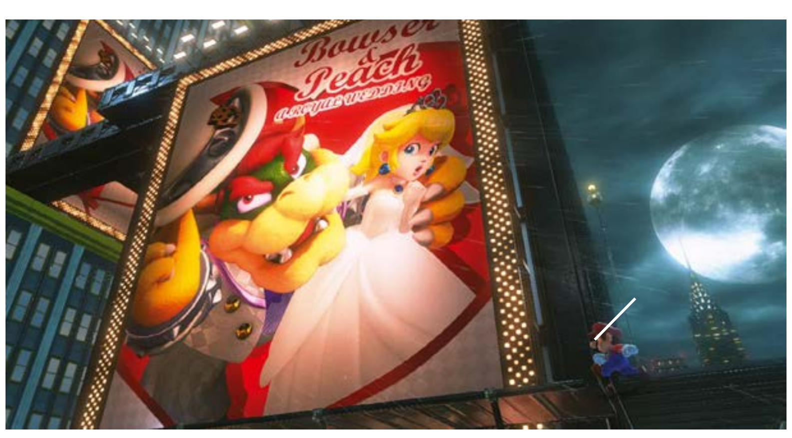
Mario, the plumber who's never actually plumbed in his entire career, is 32 this year, and despite looking every bit his age, he's currently experiencing that '30 is the new 20' renaissance (just don't call it a quarter-life crisis, okay). After a difficult few years as a teenager, during which the somewhat contentious *Super Mario Sunshine* came out, Mario hit his stride in his early twenties with *Super Mario Galaxy*, a game that stunned us all with its intelligent and inventive level design. It was the *Mario* game we'd all been waiting for: a *Super Mario Bros* for the new age. It's also been ten years, ten whole years, since *Super Mario Galaxy* came out – and, let's be honest, Mario has lost his way since then.

Super Mario 3D World is fine. It's a party game. It's fine. *Super Mario Maker* is great, but that's mostly down to the imagination of the community making the levels. And *Super Mario Run*? Meh. So when *Super Mario Odyssey* was announced during the Nintendo Switch preview event, people were understandably sceptical. Will this be the second *Mario* renaissance we've been waiting for, or another relative disappointment for our rotund friend?

Well, we won't know more fully until this winter, when the game is due to release – barring any delays between now and then. But from what we've seen already, it looks like it's going to be a modern update of *Super Mario 64*, but instead of a castle hub world and magical paintings that hide new levels behind them, it'll be a bit more like *Skyward Sword* meets *Super Mario Galaxy*, as you fly between levels in an airship.

We know a fair bit about the hub world, and not all of it is good. For starters, it takes place in a real city (not a *real* city, because New Donk City is not a place that has ever existed) which raises a lot of interesting and slightly philosophical questions. The city is populated by humans, actual humans, that are twice the height of Mario and much more well-proportioned. Is Mario human? What do the other people think of this cartoonish, chubby Italian boy running around their city? Can Mario get run over by the taxis? What happens if he jumps off the top of a building? We can only predict that many, if not all of these questions will be answered by vigilant YouTubers, because Mario's arrival in the real, human world makes for one hell of a good meme.

/// In the trailers, we can see Mario climbing lampposts and traffic lights, vaulting off skyscrapers and bouncing off cars. Though this is only a hub world, it's not too hard to imagine that there will be things going on here, too – there's a bit where Mario plays jump rope with some random faceless women, which is certainly interesting, though it's not entirely clear if that's an actual useful thing to do in the game or not. Will the city area be like a *Mario* version of *Assassin's Creed*, where you're constantly trying to figure out how to climb up







"When we first made Mario 64... we realised that the game may be a little bit more for the core gamer, and not the casual gamer. We decided to go back and make it a little more accessible, and that's why we made Mario Galaxy"

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO NINTENDO



HAT-TASTIC

WE'VE ONLY SEEN one of Mario's hats in the trailers, which serves as a bouncing platform and frisbee. But what other hats could we see? A hat that makes Mario fly, like in *Super Mario 64*? Or a hat that turns him into a wall-climbing cat, like in *3D World*? There will definitely be new abilities in this game – so what about a hat that makes Mario look like all the regular humans in New Donk City, allowing him to live out a peaceful human life like a normal guy? Meet a girl who doesn't keep getting kidnapped, raise some kids, rent an apartment you can't afford and work as a genuine plumber. That's the dream!



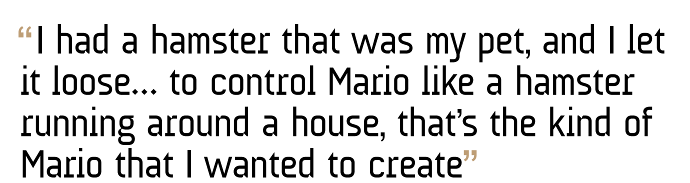
to the next area, or will it be more like *LEGO Marvel Superheroes*, which is set in New York City, and only lets you climb certain buildings?

Of course, the hub world leads to other exciting and incredibly weird levels, in traditional *Super Mario* style. The billboards and signs around New Donk City hint at the places you'll go. There's Kogwald, a factory-like place with dark colouring that's reminiscent of *Banjo-Kazooie*'s Rusty Bucket Bay and Clanker's Cavern; a really lovely-looking, neon-pastel world that's filled with anthropomorphic food; and a bright Dia De Los Muertos-style desert town that looks like something out of a Western. That might not be all the worlds, but it's certainly a good start – even if the colour palettes are a little jarring when compared directly to each other.

But what's the actual plot of this game? Though you can assume the usual – Peach gets kidnapped, Bowser has a dastardly plan, several minions have to be defeated before you can get to the big boss himself – it's a little different this time round. Firstly, Bowser is forcibly marrying Peach, which is really quite creepy. Yes, kidnapping is creepy enough, but there's something unpleasantly non-consensual about the whole marriage thing that, eh, is maybe best left in the 1900s. This is 2017, after all – can we not have a plot in which people don't want to marry Peach? It doesn't even make that much sense. Marriage is a social construct, which doesn't change the fact that she doesn't like you, dude. She'll just run away again. You don't own her. Anyway.

Another new part of the plot is the subtraction and addition of a hat. Bowser rather unkindly stomps on Mario's iconic red cap, apparently rendering it useless as a hat, but in exchange, Mario gets a new hat – one that's *alive*. This is the second time in this preview that a Rare game will be mentioned, which makes the Rare comparison seem like it might even be on purpose, especially given the upcoming *Yooka-Laylee*, but the hat looks like something out of *Banjo-Kazooie*. It's even got those trademark Rare googly eyes, which is fine, but considering that *Banjo-Kazooie* came out nearly 20 years ago, it's a weird nostalgia piece.

/// Either way, this cap seems to be an evolution of the hat mechanics in *Super Mario 64*. As a plain old hat, it'll give you something to jump on, and seemingly functions as a frisbee, maybe for attacks? It also seems like you'll be able to upgrade the hat or buy new versions of it, as there are weird purple tokens in each



"I had a hamster that was my pet, and I let it loose… to control Mario like a hamster running around a house, that's the kind of Mario that I wanted to create"

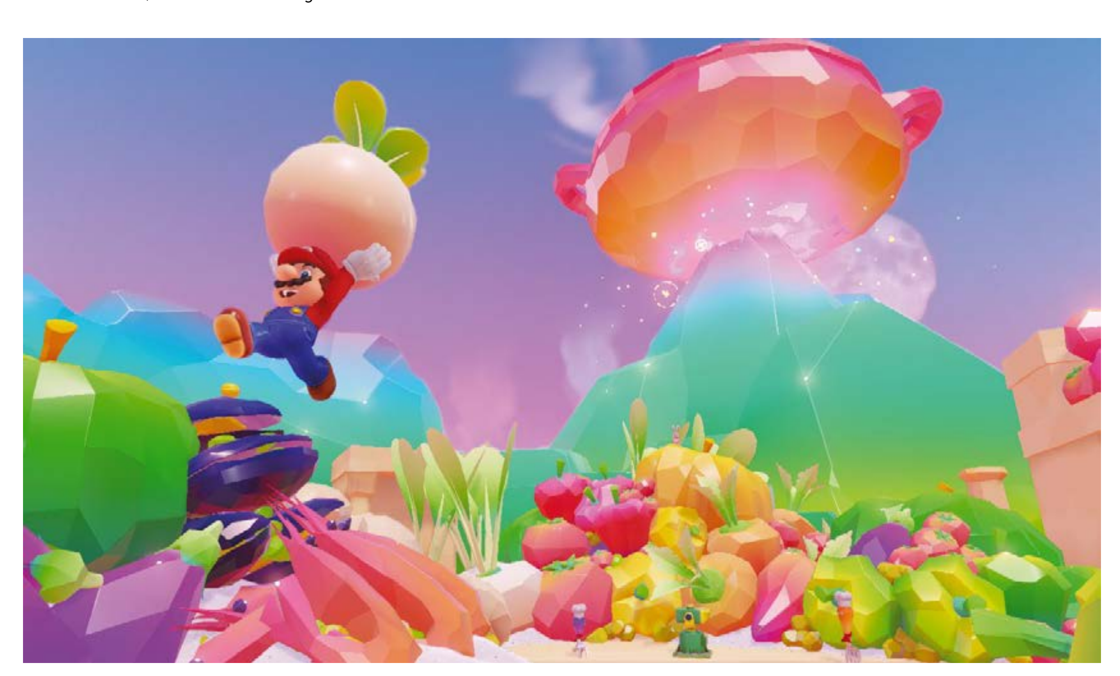
SHIGERU MIYAMOTO NINTENDO

NEW FRIENDS

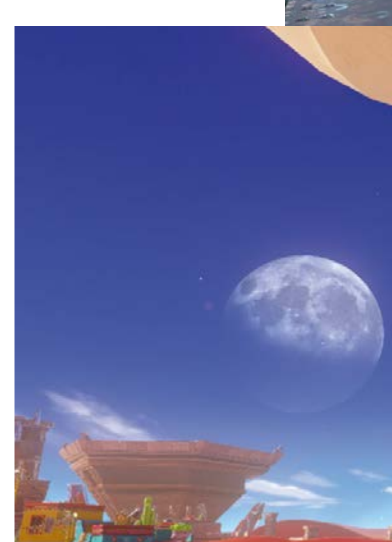
SUPER MARIO IS a game about enemies and bad guys, right? Goombas to jump on, spiky turtle boys to kick at each other, Hammer Bros to avoid. But it looks like *Odyssey*'s Mario will have a bunch of characters that, for once, don't want to kill him: the friendly humans in New Donk City, the cute little skeletons in the desert world, the chefs that are also made of food in the cooking level, and the weird mechanical teapots in Kogwald. You know what's remarkable? Not a single Toad in sight. Not even on the airship, piloting the craft like they did in *Super Mario Galaxy*. Is this a world free of the Mushroom Kingdom's ever-present servants?



Above: This western world appears to be suffering from a form of ice infestation, which you might imagine would be a relief to the inhabitants, but we're guessing that won't be the case. Right: The urban setting of *Odyssey* appears to have a bunch of fun references to Mario's first appearance as Jumpman in *Donkey Kong*, such as all the gurders and construction gear you'll see around. Below: The common theme of hats is a striking one with Mario's new sentient headgear and Bowser's snazzy tophat, but Mario also appears to fly around in a hat house to get from one stage to another. How Tardis-like is it inside?



Above: The initial reveal of *Super Mario Odyssey* was packed full of little references and nods to classic Mario appearances and some more obvious homages to his previous games. For instance, this image of Mario carrying a turnip seems like a clear call-back to *Super Mario Bros. 2*, a game that is too often left out of the Mario canon when people talk about his earliest console appearances.





level that – and we're maybe speculating too much here – could be used to purchase hats, since that seems to be a big part of this game. There are billboards for a hat shop, 'Crazy Cap', in New Donk City, and later in the trailer Mario is seen going into one of them. Maybe those hats will then unlock new areas or abilities? Who knows.

The strange thing is that we don't actually see in any of the trailers what the actual game is. Sure, we see Mario jumping around, collecting mysterious purple tokens and doing other things like jump rope and dancing to a beatbox, but none of those things are the actual game. What will we be collecting? How will we be beating Bowser?

It's a safe guess to assume that there will be some kind of system similar to Stars or Shine Sprites at the end of each level, probably in a similar way to *Super Mario Sunshine*, which had Shine Sprites as rewards for cleaning up, winning races, beating mini-bosses and various other quests. It looks like there will be bosses, too – some menacing-looking rabbits turn up halfway through the trailer, and Mario is seen fighting one a few seconds later. There's also a mad caterpillar thing that climbs up a skyscraper, King Kong-style, presumably to fight Mario as well. There's also a very short section where Mario chases a small pink rabbit with a turnip – there were rabbit chases in *Super Mario 64*, but they were frustrating, so a return to those wouldn't exactly be the most exciting thing.

But, still, it would have been nice to know what needs doing in this new *Mario* world. Just an idea of a central mechanic – *Super Mario 64* explored the platforming genre in 3D for the first time, *Sunshine* focused on graffiti-cleaning and *Super Mario Galaxy* had self-contained levels that you had to perfect as well as complete. *Odyssey* looks fun to explore, but whether or not it has substance is unclear. The other great *Super Mario* games had something unique about them, whether that was location, mechanics or pitch-perfect level design. Putting eyes on a hat is not enough if you won't show us what that means.

Super Mario Odyssey may represent the more stable years of the *Super Mario* franchise, and here's hoping it does. There's not much to go on – that hat likely plays a big part in what makes *Odyssey* unique, but we won't know more for a while – but this could be a return to a more complicated *Mario* after years of resisting that direction. A *Mario* world that's full of things to do, secrets to find, and, uh, stuff to jump on, rather than the *Super Mario 3D World* approach of keeping things simple, limited and obvious. *Odyssey* could be the game *Sunshine* might have been if it was more confident, and that would be something truly special.

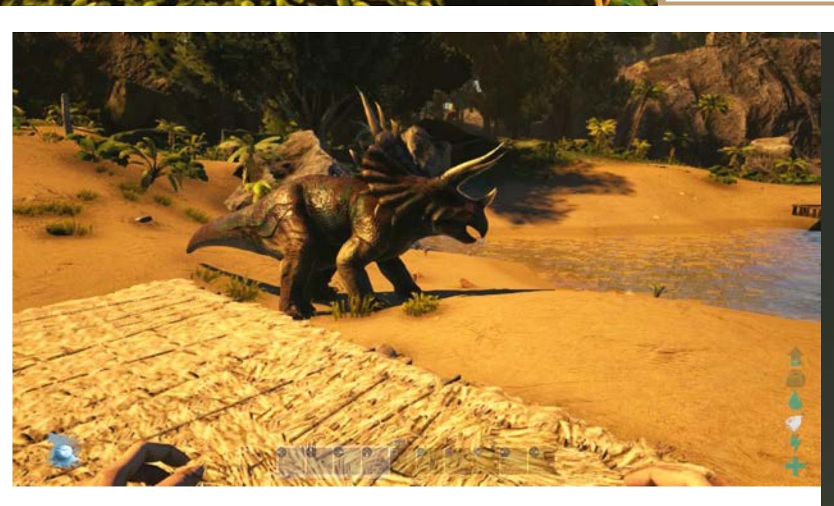
■ *Ark: Survival Evolved* certainly isn't the friendliest of places to inhabit – be it the community or the AI-controlled prehistoric population – but persevere and you'll be gathering resources, building structures and riding dinos in no time.



THE STANDALONE MODE THAT NEVER WAS

BACK IN 2016, while still working on the ever-expanding main game, Studio Wildcard announced that it would be releasing a standalone mode based in the same world as *Ark. Survival Of The Fittest* was planned to be a free spin-off that ultimately turned the game into a 72-player MOSA (Multiplayer Online Survival Arena) where users would fight to the death, *Hunger Games*-style.

While the main game itself naturally leaned towards PvP encounters, streamlining the game into a more tense, combative experience made *Ark: Survival Of The Fittest* a far more competitive offering. Studio Wildcard even organised an eSports tournament, with a tasty prize pool of $50,000. However, reluctance to monetise the mode soon saw it absorbed back into the main game.



■ Above: Yes, that's really a pair of T-Rexs with saddles on them. Almost every big creature in *Ark* can be tamed, but you'll need the right saddle first. Right: The island is split up into areas defined by difficulty – in other words, locations where you might survive for a little bit longer than others. Most are filled with docile dinosaurs and resources to help you get started.



Ark: Survival Evolved

CONCEPT ■ An open-world action adventure, *Ark* tasks you with surviving on an island filled with prehistoric beasts, dinosaurs and other survivors. Think *Skyrim* meets *Turok*… ish.

Not quite a walk in the Jurassic Park

Following 18 months in various forms of early access on PC, a voyage on to consoles and a controversial decision to release expansions and DLC before it's even finished, *Ark: Survival Evolved* is finally nearing completion. So with developer Studio Wildcard planning to have the base game finalised by the spring, there's plenty to look out for in the open-world of dinosaurs, muscles and den building.

The game has garnered something of a cult following on PC – question is, how well does it stack up on consoles? Fears over any sense of feature reduction to make such a grand experience functional on Xbox One and PS4 can be banished from the off – every element that's made *Ark* so famous (and infamous) is present and correct. That's right – the *Skyrim/Turok/Minecraft* mash-up has arrived in full-fat mode, with its developer intending to bring the consoles on par with the PC version.

So you can build structures and fortify them into strongholds, create or join tribes with other players to control regions and hunt and tame the 60+ species of prehistoric creatures that roam *Ark's* lush gameworld, *Far Cry Primal*-style. Of course, Ubisoft's open-world caveman simulator only let you tame a sabretooth tiger – *Ark* lets you pop a saddle on everything from a Pteranodon to a Giganotosaurus. Yes, that even includes a T-Rex, you crazy kids.

That number of is set to swell with the recent addition of five new species (Cnidaria Omnimorph, Troodon Magnanimus, Pegomastax Fructarator, Tusoteuthis Vampyrus and Therizinosaurus Multiensis) and there are even plans to raise the total count to more than 100 – although we doubt we'll get that many by the time Studio Wildcard's planned Spring 2017 'completion' date. Still, Dr Henry Wu would be proud.

Sadly, one of the biggest issues – a sheer lack of tutorials – has followed the game onto PS4 and Xbox One, making it consistently non-inclusive to inexperienced players. Wildcard obviously wants *Ark* to feel as intimidating as its concept suggests, but for a game with as much scope as this – offering players everything from the ability to farm crops and build strongholds, to the power to explore vast plains and underwater caves (a new addition in an update in mid-January) – you feel instantly, hopelessly lost without a group of experienced friends and an exhaustive Wiki guide to help you on your way.

Make no mistake: the *Ark* world wants to beat you bloody and break you the moment that you wake up half naked with an implant in your arm (which is used for bringing up your token RPG-esque inventory). The community is full of players straight out of the *DayZ* school for sociopaths, who will club you to death on sight. And if it's not the other players that get you, you'll either starve to death, break a bone and bleed to death or be eviscerated by a pack of wild raptors.

> "Even though we're a relatively small team at Wildcard, we've tried to provide, 'something for everyone,' in Ark, because we know that every gamer has their own preferences"
>
> JEREMY STIEGLITZ STUDIO WILDCARD

But when it clicks – linking up with players who aren't looking to paint their stronghold with your viscera and hunting down your first big dino and taming it with a carefully-crafted saddle – *Ark* reveals its true potential and you finally feel like a new-age Turok, bow and all. There's a great game inside, you just have to cut through a lot of obnoxious undergrowth to reach the good stuff.

From a mechanical point of view, *Ark* is a real mixed bag. Our time on the island meandered between relatively stable, to almost unplayable as the framerate dropped to single figures. Sure, this is still a game 'in-development', but with its intended completion date so near, we'd expect it to be a lot more stable than this. There are also plenty of bugs yet to be ironed out – an odd blue light that fills your screen every time you're near water being one of the most irritating.

Ark: Survival Evolved has the potential to be one of PS4 and Xbox One's most exciting new titles, but with so many other titles vying for your time, Studio Wildcard still has plenty of work on its hands.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: United States
Publisher: Studio Wildcard
Developer: Studio Wildcard
Release: Out now
Players: 1-72

Developer Profile

Based in Washington, Studio Wildcard is a relatively new studio. Founded by Jesse Rapczak (whose work credits include *Borderlands* and *Uncharted 2*) and Doug Kennedy (a former games PR head), Studio Wildcard currently only has *Ark: Survival Evolved* and *Ark: Survival Of The Fittest* (a spin-off that was eventually absorbed back into the main game) to its name.

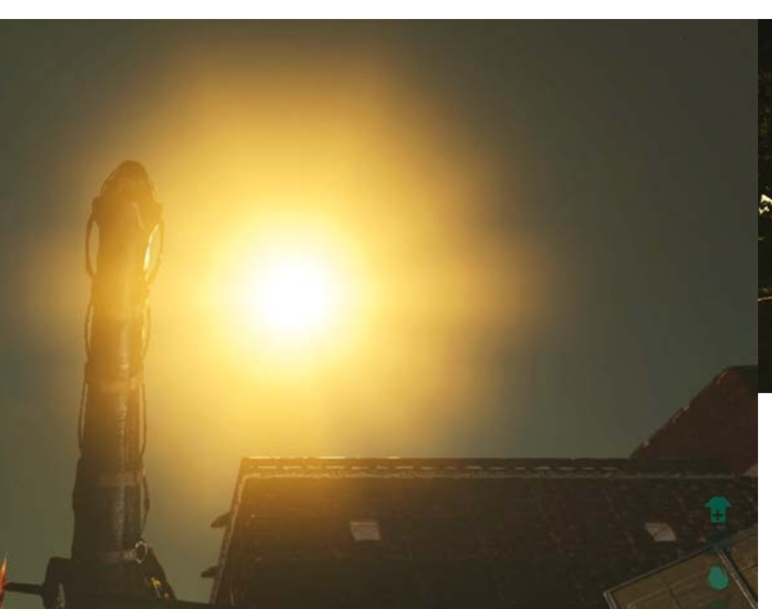
Developer History

Ark: Survival Evolved **2015 [PC, Xbox One, PS4]**

Ark: Survival of the Fittest **2016 [Xbox One, PS4, PC]**

High Point

As the developers only main offering, *Ark: Survival Evolved* qualifies and wins the accolade of Studio Wildcard's best game. While it's missed a few deadlines, it's grown in popularity thanks to a dedicated following on Twitch.





■ Above: There's an *Assassin's Creed*-esque sci-fi element to the whole thing – not that you'll notice as a T-Rex chases you through a jungle



"If [the mini-games] go some way in helping revitalise local multiplayer modes, then great. Personally I'd love to see more!"
ANDY ROBINSON PLAYTONIC GAMES

Yooka-Laylee

CONCEPT ■ Playtonic's crowdfunded, Rare-style 3D platformer encapsulates everything that was great about the genre in the late Nineties and early 2000s.

Playtonic joins the local multiplayer revival

Everything we've learnt so far about *Yooka-Laylee* reads like a love letter to the glittering heyday of 3D platformers. As we hurtle towards launch day for the crowdfunded title, headed up by a quite astonishing lineup of industry veterans responsible for games like *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Perfect Dark*, we almost feel nervous for the Playtonic team. Not only is £2.1 million of Kickstarter backers' money behind this ambitious project, but it can be argued that the nostalgic hopes and dreams of twenty-somethings the world over are riding on *Yooka-Laylee* being the Rare-style 3D platformer they've been awaiting for years.

Playtonic certainly has its mind focused on the modern market and is displaying the technical nous to get a beautiful result out of modern tools, despite the team cutting its collective teeth in the glory days of the late Nineties and early 2000s. However, recent announcements hint at a group of artists and devs with a keen eye on the past, too. For one, Playtonic has included eight distinct mini-games in *Yooka-Laylee*, based in a separate arcade-style environment cultivated by the dinosaur Rextro (complete with utterly mad, garbled voice work that has tumbled straight out of *Banjo-Kazooie*).

"We've always been big fans of local multiplayer games and the kind of interaction they cause that you don't often get online," begins Playtonic's Andy Robinson. "Putting our own competitive games in *Yooka-Laylee* was mostly because we are fans. The likes of *Banjo-Tooie* and *Smash Bros* get rolled most lunchtimes in our office."

The games themselves come in diverse forms, and from recent videos we can see puzzle aspects, a racing game and battle-centric modes, too. This comes at a time when mini-games and local multiplayer modes have rather gone our of fashion, to be honest – online multiplayer is now the order of the day, while local experiences to be enjoyed with friends have taken a backseat.

The main single-player mode in *Yooka-Laylee* also boasts its own local couch-play element. "At any point during the single-player adventure, a second player can jump in using another controller and take charge of the Bee Team, an on-screen entourage who can help out by grabbing hard-to-reach Quills, preventing traps from damaging Yooka and Laylee, or by collecting and storing butterflies in order to release them later on when the buddy duo are low on health," explains Robinson.

Although this Bee Team addition sounds, at first, like it might not be the most meaningful addition of a co-op component we've seen, it's still a taste of how deep Playtonic wants *Yooka-Laylee* to be. Far from just being a fitting homage to the N64 days when Rare was the best mark of quality a game could bear, the prodigiously talented dev team, marketable characters and varied game modes that make up *Yooka-Laylee* could mark the start of a new wave of gold-standard 3D platformers when it leaps into action in April.



■ Above: Eight distinct mini-games have been revealed as a supplement to the main story mode in *Yooka-Laylee*.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC, Switch
Origin: UK
Publisher: Team17
Developer: Playtonic Games
Release: 11 April 2017
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Chris Sutherland worked for Rare at the height of its powers and provided code and voice work for some of the developer's most beloved games. Now, as project director and software engineer for *Yooka-Laylee*, Sutherland has been reunited with some of Rare's most experienced team members, including Gavin Price and Steve Mayles.

Developer History

Donkey Kong Country, **1994 [Multi]**
Battletoads, **1994 [Arcade]**
Banjo-Kazooie, **1998 [N64]**
Banjo-Tooie, **2000, [N64]**

High Point

Objectively, Chris Sutherland's highlight is being responsible for the mechanics behind some amazing games. Subjectively, Sutherland's high point is the bizarre yet unforgettable voice work he provided for *Banjo-Kazooie*.

■ Left: Everything we've seen so far from *Yooka-Laylee* points to it being a fun and accomplished 3D platformer with one foot in the present, and the other planted defiantly in the past. Below: The visual aesthetic screams *Banjo-Kazooie* at every turn, but *Yooka-Laylee* certainly has enough of a voice to stand on its own.







■ Left: The game is set in the same universe as the original, meaning there will certainly be supernatural elements. Below: Red Barrels looks to have diversified with its locations for its sequel. Rather than being confined to one location we look to be taken on a tour of varied and, importantly, interesting-looking areas.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Red Barrels
Developer: In-house
Release: Q1 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Formed by ex-Ubisoft employees Philippe Morin, Hugo Dallaire and David Chateauneaf, Montreal-based Red Barrels is a relatively young studio, having been formed in 2012 and with only one published title to its name: first-person horror, *Outlast*.

Developer History

Outlast
2013 [PC, PS4, Xbox One]
Outlast: Whistleblower
2014 [PC, PS4, Xbox One]
The Murkoff Account
2016 [Comic]

High Point

Outlast could've easily fallen by the wayside as 'just another indie horror game' if it weren't for PewDiePie. His exaggerated and terrified reactions to the game bolstered its popularity and before long *Outlast* became a common word on the Internet.

Outlast 2

CONCEPT ■ For the most part, *Outlast 2* doesn't look to innovate on its predecessor's 'flight-not-fight' mechanics, rather delivering a more audacious and depraved follow-up.

Grave encounters

You can thank one person for *Outlast*'s widespread popularity: PewDiePie. His first 'let's play' video of the first-person horror game currently stands just shy of *17 million* views – that's one hell of an advertisement. But what made *Outlast* stand out from the other, incredibly similar, horror games he was peddling at the time – *Amnesia*, *Slender* et al? Easy: a camcorder, and a surprising amount of polish for an indie developer that was cutting its teeth.

The found-footage approach worked wonders for Red Barrels, *Outlast*'s developer, and much like horror sequels from Hollywood, Red Barrels is looking to double down on the scares, set-pieces and sinister settings that made the original *Outlast* so compelling. And that's all it can do, really. Creating a first-person horror game where the player can't fight back is an almost Faustian deal: on the one hand you have genuine fear – due the emphasis on avoiding enemies, and the inability to fight back – however, there's only so many ways that limited gameplay can be developed on. So it's a logical move for the developer to go big on scare tactics and fearmongering in this new instalment.

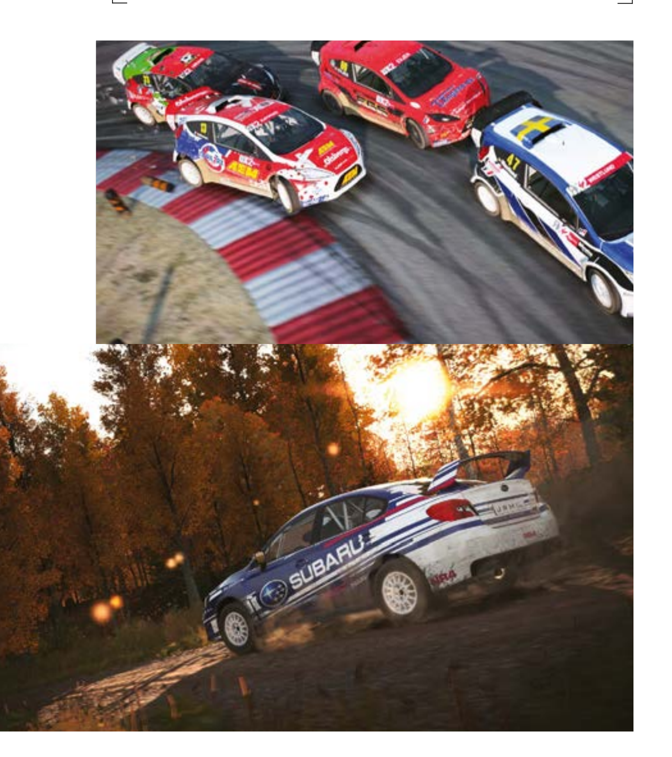
And based on its demo, *Outlast 2* delivers. While the original game was set solely in an asylum, the sequel looks to take you across a tour of a deranged slice of the American south – from a primitive commune, to a seemingly-haunted school through to a homestead, complete with a game of 'hide-and-don't-die' in a cornfield – with a Jonestown-like cult being the constant that ties everything together. It's a nice change, and shows that the team can produce something interesting outside of the iron cells and beaten-down corridors of the original game's asylum.

It kind of helps, as a horror game, to generate real and genuine scares, too, and Red Barrels is on track to shit you up. Jump scares, while cheap, are used sparingly and aren't telegraphed like a teen slasher film – this is complemented by some genuinely unsettling imagery: a silhouette of a person hanging in a school corridor, a pit of dead bodies, cultists' flashlight beams peering through a cornfield in which you are hiding – all of which are emphasised through *Outlast*'s defining feature: its monochrome video camcorder.

While *Outlast 2* can be dismissed as 'more of the same', it is clear that Red Barrels is attempting to create something that's a significant step up in quality, despite confining itself to a genre where you can't really innovate – mechanically, at least. The game has a tentative release date of Q1 2017, however time is running out on that window, so it's a fair bet to see this one later on in the year. Regardless, it looks to be worth the wait.

> "Outlast 2 will test your faith, pushing players to a place where going mad is the only sane thing to do"
> PR RED BARRELS

Above: Codemasters has managed to pack in over 50 offroad cars into this new title, which is an impressive selection of past and present superstars of the rally circuit.



Above: User-created routes through procedurally locations means that the number of possible courses in different disciplines far exceeds anything you would have seen from a *Dirt* game in the past.

Dirt 4

CONCEPT A racer built around rally cars, *Dirt 4* offers both traditional rally events alongside rallycross and off-road circuit racing.

A rally for everyone

Since its spiritual origins in 1998's *Colin McRae Rally*, the *Dirt* franchise has undergone a number of makeovers. From a concentration on traditional rally championships and ideals to the more modern phenomenon of head-to-head rallycross and stunt competitions, the series has always sought to adapt itself and mirror the trends of the moment. With *Dirt 4*, the idea is very much to combine all of what developer Codemasters has learnt over the years into a single game.

To that end, the first showing of *Dirt 4* includes the option to race across what would be considered a typical rally stage that sees you drive from point A to B as quickly as possible, relying on your co-driver to keep you aware of upcoming corners and dangers, as well as a more chaotic and fashionable mud and dirt circuit race. As you might imagine, the rally rewards precise, intelligent, reactive driving, while the carnage of the track race is more about shunting opponents out of the way and, once you're near the front, avoiding danger.

Codemasters has chosen to reveal the game through these two race types for a very specific reason: *Dirt 4* is designed as a racing game that should appeal to all players, whether you're a seasoned pro or green behind the ears. If you combined together *Dirt Showdown* and *Dirt Rally*, the two most recent releases in the series, you'd get something close to where *Dirt 4* wants to be.

To this end there is a very big emphasis on making sure that both accessibility and depth are taken care of. In terms of the former, three different handling modes offer different degrees of assistance, ranging from no help to everything tuned up to maximum. If you're a seasoned *Dirt Rally* player then you're likely going to dive straight into the no-assist option, whereas if the sum of your experiences is limited plays of *Showdown* then you're probably going to need to enlist more help.

> "It shouldn't just be the racing game genre that we're aiming at, we want to attract players that like all genres"
> PAUL COLEMAN CODEMASTERS

A career mode that sees you compete in championships as well as hire and fire mechanics and engineers is where the most obvious long-term propositions reside, but the real depth comes from a procedural track generation system Codemasters has dubbed 'Your Stage'.



SHALLOWER LEARNING CURVES

DIRT RALLY'S SUCCESS with fans of the sport means that the announcement of *Dirt 4*, as opposed to Codemasters dedicating itself to *Dirt Rally 2*, is invariably going to be met with disappointment from some. Game director Paul Coleman, however, is keen to explain that the rally fundamentals aren't being lost here, but they are being made more accessible to more people via a less severe learning curve.

"In *Dirt Rally* we might have set the bar too high when it came to mastering a specific skill. Trying to bridge that gap between not knowing anything about rally to being able to play *Dirt Rally* and for it to be enjoyable represented a huge vertical learning curve for a lot of people. Smoothing that learning curve out a great deal will help those people that were interested in the concept of rally driving but couldn't engage with it."

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin:
UK
Publisher:
Codemasters
Developer:
In-house
Release:
9 June 2017
Players:
1 (2-8 online)

Developer Profile

Codemasters is synonymous with racing games. From the offroad racing of *Colin McRae Rally* to the track racing of *Grid*, to toy racing of *Micro Machines* and stadium stunts of *Dirt Showdown*, there is barely a form of racing the UK studio has not turned its experienced hand to.

Developer History

Colin McRae Rally **1998 [Multi]**
Micro Machines V4 **2006 [Multi]**
Race Driver: Grid **2008 [Multi]**
Dirt Rally **2015 [Multi]**

High Point

Colin McRae remains a defining moment in the history of the rally genre, highlighting the potential of the sport to be replicated on home consoles.

Using sliders you define how long and how complicated you'd like your stage to be and the game then generates it for you. Once you've raced around it you can save it to drive through again if you like it and/or send it to friends alongside a challenge to have them beat your time. As in the real world of rally driving, the idea is to present you with a stage that you have little to no knowledge of prior to setting your tyres upon the dirt for the first. Therefore, the real skill comes from being able to quickly adapt and react to whatever is put in front of you.

One of the more interesting potential uses of Your Stage comes in multiplayer. Once you enter a lobby you can choose to race each other across a newly generated track, as opposed to those that come with the game by default. This should level the playing field as no one competitor will have any experience racing the track in question. Therefore, it pays to constantly test yourself by practising on as many stages as possible rather than trying to memorise the same few off by heart.

What *Dirt 4* is trying to do, then, is embrace the core traditions of the world of rally while adding as much extra content and means of interaction as required to entice those put off by the technicalities and high-barrier of entry inherent to the sport. If it can pull off its attempt at being simultaneously complicated and accessible then it will have succeeded where many, many others have failed miserably.

Codemasters' experience in the racing genre means *Dirt 4* has more of a chance than most games to make good on its objectives and the elite quality the series has often achieved means there's every possibility that this could be the most sophisticated and welcoming game in the series to date.



■ Above: Landrush mode offers a series of short courses for a fast and frantic experience behind the wheel of pro buggies, pro trucks and crosskarts. Below: A new damage model is being introduced in *Dirt 4* that requires engineers to repair your car between stages in limited time.



Splatoon 2

CONCEPT ■ This sequel is a straightforward return to the family-friendly shooting action of the original, in which teams of squid kids shoot ink at each other

Can the all-ages shooter stay fresh the second time out?

As one of the few highlights of the Wii U's brief shelf life, *Splatoon* was an unexpected success that stood out from Nintendo's other first-party offerings. Not only did it utilise a brand new IP to successfully put a family-friendly spin on the competitive shooter, but it was a predominantly online-focused game from a company not traditionally known for making them, and it sold an impressive 4.5 million copies as a result.

Splatoon 2 can't be the surprise hit that its predecessor was, but everything we've seen so far suggests that the game will offer plenty of worthwhile upgrades over the original experience.

The core gameplay mode of *Splatoon 2* remains the Turf War, a four-on-four battle in which teams compete to cover the surface of the stage with their colour ink. All of the weapons from the first game return, including the Splatling and Slosher types introduced in the long-term DLC support. We've also only seen one new type of weapon so far (see the box out for more on that). Special moves are all brand new, and we've seen a few fun ones so far – the Tenta-Missiles that snake through the air before splatting their target with an enormous amount of ink, and the String Ray, a narrow long-distance blast that is powerful enough to pierce walls. New sub-weapons were also on show, and there are brand new stages to wage warfare in, but we're not entirely sure how many of each are included yet.

Moving away from the Wii U gamepad hasn't done any harm to the game, for the most part – gyroscopic aiming remains responsive whether you're using the Switch itself or the Pro Controller. However, losing the permanent presence of the touchscreen map is a tad disappointing. While you can still bring it up and 'super jump' to assist teammates at the touch of a button, it's never quite as seamless as it was on the Wii U, where a quick glance between thumbs could tell you the next area in need of your colours without any substantial interruption.

Improvements beyond that are largely structural. One of the most surprising decisions with the original game was the lack of communication options; this has been rectified with *Splatoon 2*, which will offer voice chat via the smart device app that Nintendo has placed at the centre of its online offering. Also welcome is the increased focus on offline multiplayer – while the original game only offered one-on-one Battle Dojo matches, *Splatoon 2* allows for full eight-player Turf War matches over a local wireless network. The simple presence of voice chat and local multiplayer will go a long way to making this worthwhile for hardcore fans of the original.

What's more, Nintendo is promising that *Splatoon 2* will receive substantial post-launch DLC support, just like the first game received ongoing updates with extra stages and weapons, so the game that exists on day one is unlikely to resemble the one we're left with after six months.

> "It has been about two years since I discovered the squid, and it seems there have been many changes to the squid world in that time"
> HISASHI NOGAMI NINTENDO

While existing fans are likely to love it and the players who missed the Wii U will have no reason not to, our concerns with *Splatoon 2* are mostly centred on those who enjoyed the Wii U version for a while before moving on, as we're unsure how far it can differentiate itself from the original game. Right now, it feels largely like an expansion pack for the original, offering a very similar experience with a variety of added bonus elements – but in part that's simply because we don't know what the final balance will be between new content and returning content, not to mention any additions to the first game's short but sweet single-player content. If Nintendo does prove able to keep things sufficiently fresh, *Splatoon 2* is likely to be one of the first great Switch-exclusives.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Switch
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: Summer 2017
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Hisashi Nogami's career at Nintendo started in the mid-nineties, working as a character designer and 3D artist on the *Mario* and *Yoshi* series. He later served as director of the *Animal Crossing* series, before his debut as a producer with the original *Splatoon* in 2015.

Developer History

Splatoon **2015 [Wii U]**
Animal Crossing **2002 [GameCube]**
Mario Kart 64 **1996 [N64]**
Yoshi's Island **1995 [SNES]**

High Point

Nogami's ascension to directorial duties with *Animal Crossing* was a major moment – as well as moving on from established properties, he proved capable of nurturing a quirky new IP.





■ Above: The movement of the map from a second screen to full-screen usage does interrupt the flow of the game slightly





■ Above: Despite the fact that the Switch has a bit more graphical grunt than the Wii U, *Splatoon 2* doesn't show much evidence of this – in fact, it looks near-identical to the original game both in stills and in motion Below: Thankfully for mixed multiplayer sessions, the game plays well with the Switch in handheld mode and TV mode using a Pro Controller

SPLAT DUALIES

The only new weapon on show during our time with *Splatoon 2* was the intriguing Splat Dualies – a pair of low-damage, high-speed handguns that do the most damage when your target is centred and thus in range of both your targeting reticules. While using these, your Inkling character gains the secondary ability of an evasive combat roll, which can be used twice in succession. However, the most spectacular ability of the Splat Dualies is the special weapon mode, the Inkjet – your Inkling fires both guns straight at the floor with sufficient speed to lift itself into the air, covering the ground below with ink and doing major damage to anyone foolish enough to wander beneath you.



REFRESHED BATTLE SYSTEM

Collecting, levelling and battling alongside Familiars has been ditched. While the system was deep, it was needlessly complicated, and so you'll now be collecting little sprites called Higgledies as a way of refreshing the battle system. Now you'll be able to use a pop-up menu to take charge of your Higgledies; each wields a different elemental power that also comes into play to aid in world map progression too.

THE CONQUERING HERO

Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom is primarily focused on Evan, a young prince who unwittingly inherits (and subsequently loses) the throne to Ding Dong Dell, a city no doubt familiar to those of you who played the PS3 original. Following the coup, you'll be charged with establishing your own kingdom, forging new friendships and fighting to reclaim what is rightfully yours.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: Level-5
Release: TBC 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Formed in 1998 by Akinhiro Hino, Level-5 is perhaps best known for its work on the *Inazuma* and *Professor Layton* franchises, though JRPG fans will of course know the studio for its stellar work on *Dark Cloud*, *White Knight Chronicles* and *Ni No Kuni*.

High Point

Professor Layton And The Curious Villager was a surprise hit for the Nintendo DS back in 2007, an accessible adventure game well loved by kids and adults alike.

Developer History

Dark Cloud **2000 [PS2]**
Professor Layton And The Curious Village **2007 [NDS]**
Inazuma Eleven **2008 [NDS]**
Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of the White Witch **2011 [PS3]**



Ni No Kuni 2: Revenant Kingdom

CONCEPT ■ A fantasy adventure set in a gorgeous Studio Ghibli inspired world.

A brave new world

Arriving ahead of a generation shift, *Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch* never received the love and admiration it perhaps deserved. Developed by Level-5 – in collaboration with the famed Studio Ghibli – the 2013 JRPG delighted with its stunning presentation, deep systems and story of love and loss cast across two worlds.

So a sequel always seemed like such a dizzying proposition, the opportunity for Level-5 to iterate upon some of the weaker elements of *Wrath Of The Witch* – we are still haunted by the combat grind – but now it's here, we're having to approach it with some degree of caution; Studio Ghibli is not attached, while links to the original are tangential at best.

Although that isn't to say there isn't a lot to love about *Revenant Kingdom*. Ultimately Level-5 is aware that many missed out on the original and so the concept is being refocused. The studio is suggesting that we think of this version of the *Ni No Kuni* world as a reflection of the one we previously adventured across. Returning city Ding Dong Dell may be the star this time out, but it'll be different, older; separating the games by hundreds of years gives Level-5 the space to tell a new story, to invite new gamers in and, integrally, make sweeping changes to the core systems.

In reality, while we are having a hard time of letting go of Oliver and, of course, Drippy, there's something delightfully refreshing about the approach to *Revenant Kingdom* that Level-5 is taking here. The focus is moving from the sharing of souls between the denizens of Ni No Kuni and our real world, instead we will see new hero Evan fighting to reclaim Ding Dong Dell and establish his own kingdom – what would a game be in 2017 without a crafting element, eh?

Fantastic JRPGs are hard to come by these days, and so long as Level-5 can continue to dutifully iterate on what has come before – while still retaining the spirit and heart that made the original so memorable – we're willing to give it a chance. Besides, with an exact 2017 release still TBC, who's to say that there isn't still time to cast a sprightly Welsh companion?

> "You can quote us on this: Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom is going to be truly irreplaceable in everyone's mind!"
>
> HERVÉ HOERDT BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT EUROPE

GORGEOUS PRESENTATION

■ While Studio Ghibli isn't providing beautiful 2D animations for this sequel (the studio is on active hiatus), the game does admittedly look stunning under the guiding hand of lead studio Level-5. Running at a smooth 60fps on PS4, *Revenant Kingdom* looks to be a much fuller realisation of *Wrath Of The White Witch's* cinematic aspirations; it is colourful, evocative and stunning to spend time within.

REAL-TIME COMBAT

■ The addition of the Higgledies, alongside three rotatable characters essentially means that combat is quicker than before, with the basic foundation of battles shifting towards frantic real-time engagements; mixing a newfound depth in combat with a refreshed sense of ongoing tactical awareness. It's a change of pace compared to the considered keystrokes of the previous game, but it seems to be a welcome addition.

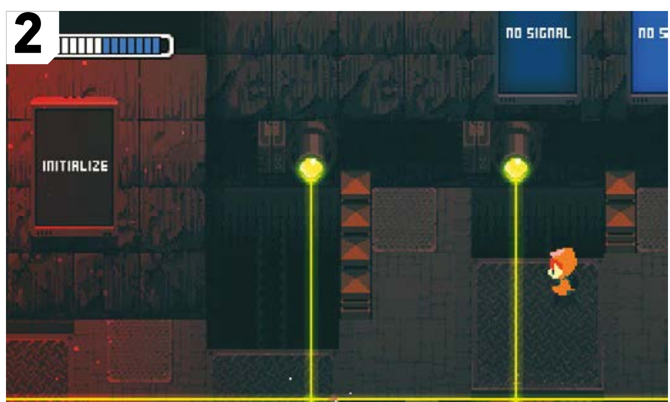
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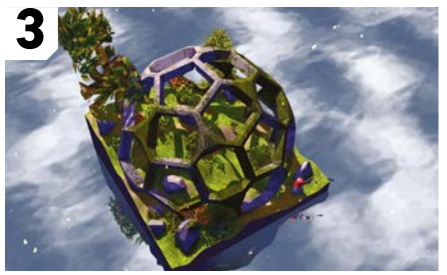
■ One of the playable characters joining your active roster will be Roland, who is actually a citizen of Ichi No Kuni – that's our 'real' world, for those of you not keeping up at home – where he was a 48-year old president of an undisclosed nation. Now he find himself transformed into a 20-year-old warrior in the realm of Ni No Kuni, charged with protecting a kid with cat ears, *because reasons.*

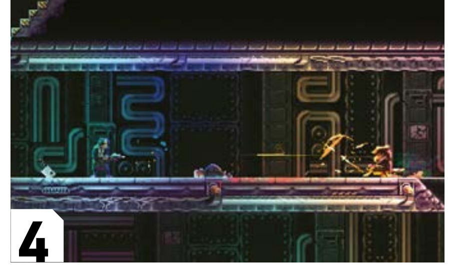
SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON











NO TRUCE WITH THE FURIES

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **ZA/UM Studio**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

1 Isometric RPGs have been enjoying a rewarding renaissance of late and this fascinating game could well help push them into even more agreeable directions. Inspired by titles like *Planescape: Torment* and *Kentucky Route Zero, No Truce With The Furies* is going to offer a police procedural role-playing game where combat is settled in conversation and your inventory is made up of thoughts. If that doesn't make any sense to you at this point, don't worry yourself, just take a look at the pretty visuals, because with dynamic weather and lighting it promises to be one of the best looking isometric games you could hope to see.

RADIO THE UNIVERSE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **6e6e6e**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

2 This enticing, retro-inspired RPG has been in development since 2012 and in that time has been beaten to market by a somewhat similar, although slightly faster-paced title of similar origins. We can't help but see a little *Hyper Light Drifter* in 6e6e6e's Kickstarted *Radio The Universe*, but this does feel a little different. The art style is gloomy, forboding, but offset nicely by relatively cute pixelart models. Despite the long development process, updates continue right up to mid-January this year, so it's looking more and more likely that release is imminent. Hopefully backers have remained patient.

MIEGAKURE

Format: **PS4, PC**
Publisher: **Marc Ten Bosch**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

3 How exactly does a 4D puzzle game work when the fourth dimension isn't time, but actually another dimension of our own reality? Something like *Miegakure* is the obvious answer. This puzzler challenges you to think about percieved reality in order to navigate obstacles. The style and function of these puzzles has been inspired somewhat by how 2D characters might understand a 3D space and then extrapolated from there. The surreal vision of the world morphing and unfolding before your eyes mimics seeing a MRI scan image of someones head as 2D images give the impression of 3D depth.

KATANA ZERO

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Askiisoft**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

4 Don't let the neon cyberpunk aesthetic distract you, this promises to be a fast-paced, punishing action platformer as sword faces bullet and speed will determine the victor. We're looking at some classic ninja-like mechanics in this one with wall-jumps, grapple hooks, rolling, sneaking, dashing and slicing being your primary tools. You can also hit bullets away with a precision swing of your sword, which is nice. Structurally, while it has the look of a Metroidvania, this is in fact a precisely designed, level by level experience that promises new twists and challenges at every stage to keep you on your toes.

THE SIEGE AND THE SANDFOX

Format: **TBC**
Publisher: **Chucklefish**
Developer: **Cardboard Sword**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

5 While some may feel a little weary of the Metroidvania format, others are still attempting to find new ways of approaching it and *The Siege And The Sandfox* is a grand example of that. This is a self styled Stealthvania experience offering the kind of exploration and skill levelling you would expect alongside 2D stealth gameplay. The gameplay itself is acrobatic and sharp, just as you would demand. The team behind the game has years of triple-A development experience, which should bode well and its promises for this game are given even more credence thanks to the support of Chucklefish.

A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY

WITH THE LAUNCH OF **MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA**, BIOWARE ISN'T JUST LAUNCHING A NEW TITLE IN ITS FLAGSHIP SERIES, IT'S MAKING FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES TO ITS CORE GAMEPLAY AND FEATURES. WE INVESTIGATE WHAT IS DRIVING THIS MASSIVE NEW UNDERTAKING

Mass Effect Andromeda is putting everything that has made these games great under a microscope for the most intense examination yet. By moving to a new world with new characters and removing the safety net of entering a galaxy with pre-existing governments and alliances, *Andromeda* amplifies elements of discovery, dialogue, relationship building and character customisation in ways that the original trilogy never needed to explore.

And this may be the great genius of BioWare's move from the Milky Way to Andromeda with its follow-up to *Mass Effect 3*. The Milky Way still had thousands (perhaps more likely millions) of unexplored star systems to look at even by the end of the trilogy. There were several possibilities for prequels or tangential explorations of similar characters in the world. Perhaps you could have been a member of a different species or a recruit of C-Sec (promising the possibility of teaming up with our buddy Garrus again) or maybe even take things all the way back to humanity finding a mass relay for the first time and engaging in the First Contact War with the turians. *Mass Effect*'s backstory and lore were already rich with possibilities and paths, but instead of branching out with fine tendrils from what had been built before, BioWare is striking out somewhere new in search of a fresh start – or at least as fresh a start as a game can get as part of such an established series. »


MASS
EFFECT
ANDROMEDA



Having spent over a decade with these planets and organisations, the promise of a clean slate offers a chance to set new rules and new boundaries for a series that up until now has felt pretty well established, and while that may sound a little scary for established fans, we like to think it's much more exciting. The gloves are off and the possibilities are now far more numerous than they might have been. As creative director Mac Walters has noted on Twitter, working on *Mass Effect Andromeda* has been "much more like *ME1*… a lot of world building. A lot of lore. And a lot planning."

So far BioWare has been very protective of the story details and character backgrounds in this game, urging fans to be patient and await a first-hand opportunity to see how things play out. For a game that promises so much that will be new and surprising, we can understand that inclination, and while we've delved as deeply into the reveals and teases as we can, there's still only so much we can be certain of about how *Andromeda* begins. We know, for instance, that the Andromeda Initiative is a civilian-lead operation with no official ties to the Citadel Council or Alliance military, which means that it may have a number of relatively maverick personalities among its leaders. In fact, a certain level of independence and ruthlessness is likely required to volunteer for a 600-year journey away from your home, leaving everything you've ever known behind with no possibility of return.

Such ruthlessness is likely to be found in your father, Alec Ryder, one of the first humans to pass through a mass relay, an N7-trained Alliance operative (the same as Shepard and essentially a special ops trained soldier) and scientist who is apparently responsible for the creation of your AI companion in the game, SAM. *Mass Effect* fans will remember that AI has a tricky history in this game world, essentially being outlawed by the council after the creation and revolt of the geth.
The presence of an AI companion in your operation and its integration into the role of Pathfinder highlights a certain rebel

RYDER & PALS

THE CONFIRMED CHARACTERS YOU CAN LOOK FORWARD TO MEETING, RECRUITING AND (IN SOME CASES) ROMANCING



SCOTT/ SARA RYDER

Your new player-character throughout *Mass Effect Andromeda*, Scott and Sara are twins and regardless of who you pick, the other will remain in the story working separately to you (they won't be in your squad). Both have served a single tour with Alliance military, and while accomplished, have yet to prove themselves as leaders.

ALEC RYDER

One of the first humans to ever travel through a Mass Relay in 2149, Alec has since risen up the ranks of the Alliance military to an N7 standing, making him a contemporary of Commander Shepard, although a little older. He has both a scientific and military background, which is why he is ideal for this mission.



JIEN GARSON

Founder of the Andromeda Initiative program, Garson's background has yet to be fully revealed, but as mission commander and head of the Nexus ark ship she is likely to be a regular point of contact throughout your time in Andromeda. She's in charge of all recruit training and protocols once in Andromeda.



KALLO JATH

Your pilot on board the Tempest is not only highly skilled in his particular field, he was involved in the design of your speedy, lightweight scout ship from the very beginning and as such knows it better than most. Kallo will not be available to you for ground missions, but will be by your side as you select destinations from the bridge.



SAM

The Simulated Adaptive Matrix is an AI that was actually designed by Alex Ryder himself. SAM is more tightly involved in events than even EDI was in the original trilogy, since the Pathfinder is equipped with neural implants that send and receive data with SAM. Its contribution then could be crucial to the Pathfinder's survival.



CORA HARPER

Second in command of the human ark vessel Hyperion, Cora is a biotic of substantial ability, a fact proven by her four years spent serving with the asari in a commando unit called Talein's Daughters. She does share a surname with a character from the previous trilogy, but her connection is unknown. We'll say no more.

flavour to this operation. What's more, when quizzed by fans on Twitter as to whether Alec Ryder would become an antagonist to children in the game Walters reassured that Alec would not be playing that role, but "if you were to ask Scott & Sara, they may say he is antagonistic."

As Pathfinder it is Alec's job to find a habitable world for the human-lead ark Hyperion to colonise with its 20,000 sleeping inhabitants. From what we've seen so far, it appears that long-range scans of Andromeda had identified a planet in the Helius Cluster referred to as Habitat 7 that could be ideal for the Pathfinder to colonise, but things don't go as smoothly as originally hoped. Whether it transpires that the kett, our primary antagonists, already live on this world or the Ryders inadvertently awaken the remnant, a more mysterious species native to this galaxy, we'll have to wait until March to find out, but it's a classic opening setback that will hold up the progress of the Hyperion and put the whole mission in jeopardy. At some point Alec is going to need to make one of his children the new Pathfinder.

It's interesting to take a closer look at Scott and Sara, your two options for protagonist through the game. While each is largely a blank slate for you to mould to your will, they do come with rather different backgrounds in terms of their expertise and interests. Scott has been stationed on an Alliance outpost watching others in the military sent off on new adventures while he was stuck in one place. Sara, on the other hand, has been working with scientific teams and learning about the protheans. Each begins with their own reasons for wanting to set off on a new adventure, so how that might inform and shape some of their dialogue will be interesting to see. Where male and female Shepard were exactly the same person with the same set of possible remarks, Scott and Sara may have inherently different outlooks.

This would be welcome as a slight concern we have with some of how the rest of this game is being structured would appear to remove some of the incentive for multiple playthroughs. As we've chronicled previously, we will no longer be working within a strict Paragon and Renegade morality system in this game, not least because that distinction was really more about the type of Spectre you were playing within the confines of that role. Scott and Sara don't necessarily have an authority to answer to in the same way, but then one of the best reasons to play the original trilogy titles through a couple of times was to try out Paragon and Renegade runs.

> "BioWare is striking out somewhere new in search of a fresh start, or at least as fresh a start as a game can get as part of an established series"

So, what has that been replaced with? Well, as we say some differences in the mindset of the twins is a start, making each of them worth playing through on their own regardless of the choices you happen to make and then a lot of additional fine detail. By this we mean the smaller choices and customisations you might bring to the characters, closer »



Below This is going to be a smaller, tighter knit crew than the last couple of *Mass Effect* games, but BioWare promises that each member will be more complex and compelling for it.



LIAM KOSTA
Head of security on Hyperion, Liam has a background in disaster response, which may go some way to explaining his varied skillset. He seems to be a jack of many trades and good for all scenarios, although apparently he may be a little quick to anger. Keep on his good side, though, as he's probably a delight.

PEEBEE
An asari companion you'll be picking up on your travels around the Helius Cluster, Peebee travelled on the Nexus ship but has apparently chosen to go her own way since arriving. She's been described as fun-loving and rather blunt – we're expecting her to be a bit of a rule breaker.

DRACK
You'll be picking up this krogan squadmate on your travels as his species are likely looking for ways to help propogate their species away from the Milky Way and the genophage. Drack himself is believed to be older than krogan you will have worked with previously in the series, and even more grizzled as a result.

VETRA
Our first female turian squadmate in the *Mass Effect* series also travelled on the Nexus, although many of her people will have arrived in Andromeda on their own species' ark ship. Why she decides to choose your Pathfinder team over that of her own people will be pretty interesting to find out.

JAAL
Very little is currently known about Jaal, but it would appear that he will be your first native companion from Andromeda. We understand he is one of the angara race who welcome the aliens from the Milky Way with more warmth than some in the galaxy. What insight he might bring we wouldn't even care to guess.

ARCHON
Our only named enemy at the moment, Archon seems to be at the head of the (un)welcoming committee of the kett, another new species you will encounter in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* with a more militaristic culture. It would appear to be his intention to stamp out your 'invasion' as quickly as possible.

to why you might replay through *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, to try out a new combat style, act a little more aggressively or compassionately or explore a different romance option. And then there's the crafting.

This is probably the area of *Mass Effect Andromeda* that excites and interests us as much as anything else in the game. To our minds, the real joy of *Mass Effect* is in discovery and exploration, learning more and more about the world around us. As we've said, there was plenty more we could have gotten into in the Milky Way, but this galaxy is utterly alien and new. As such we'll be encountering forms of life, structures, civilisations and technology that are unlike anything else we could have seen before. Those well versed in *Mass Effect* lore will also likely point out that since Milky Way species were influenced by the technology of mass relays placed by the Reapers, a certain uniformity of technology was to be expected among the Citadel species. Such constraints do not appear to be an issue here.

And since you can research the technology you can find in this world you can also craft new items based on the things you learn. So, as BioWare lead designer Ian Frazier has noted on Twitter, you can craft weapons like plasma-based assault rifles, something that wasn't possible in the mass effect tech based world of old. "My new assault rifle, lovingly titled 'Big Pew Pew', is a thing of beauty and wonder," he enthused. "And severe plasma burns." This would appear to be based on kett tech, whose militaristic background would lend well to some rather violent weaponry research for the crew of the Tempest, but what else might be out there? The angara seem to be more peaceful in nature (one of them even seems to be joining your crew), and their architecture appears a little more organic and naturalistic than the kett brutalism of sharp edges and bones.

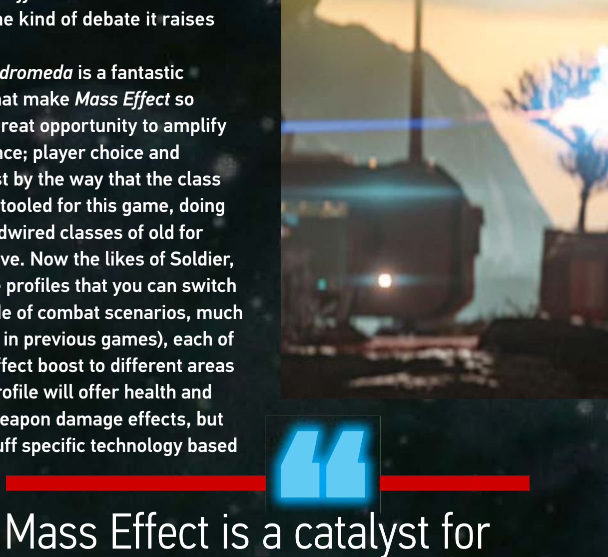
And then there's the remnant, the species who appear to be responsible for the strange semi-organic structures and caverns we've seen in gameplay trailers so far. Just the naming of these floating insectoid creatures suggests they are somehow ancient by comparison to the other species you meet here. Since the Andromeda Initiative mission appears to be in jeopardy and the Nexus is running out of power, it would seem logical that the race to uncover the power behind these strange remnant building and artefacts is what will bring you into conflict with the kett and their leading figure, Archon. Whether or not in uncovering remnant technology you in turn get the chance to craft new items based on it is something we're very excited to discover.

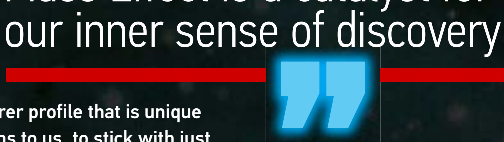
And really that's what *Mass Effect*'s greatest strength has always been; it is a catalyst for our inner sense of discovery. It's a subject that is at the heart of this series, too, that humanity's curiosity and innate sense of adventure sets them apart from other species. It's the reason why so many distrusted humanity in the Citadel, that thanks to their relatively short lives they had a drive like no other to search, learn, discover and grow. Such a drive is at the heart of what the Andromeda Initiative is all about, too, which gets us back to why this new setting and story feels like such a fantastically focused paradigm to explore the human condition once again, this time with the added strain and pressure of humanity being the alien in a strange environment.

This is also where some of the political and philosophical debate around this game is likely to stem. Are the kett just or unjust in their assessment of the threat posed by the Nexus and the arks? Are we an invading army or peaceful explorers and since we were not invited, does the distinction matter? Are we immigrants looking for a chance at a new life or a threat to the life that already exists here? We imagine many at BioWare have some thoughts in these areas, but in the past this series has allowed the player to explore and express their own feelings, being as compassionate or bullish as they wish. We expect nothing less from *Mass Effect Andromeda* and we're looking forward to seeing the kind of debate it raises for the community.



Because ultimately, just as *Andromeda* is a fantastic magnifying glass for the themes that make *Mass Effect* so interesting as a world, it is also a great opportunity to amplify what makes it great as an experience; player choice and expression. This is exemplified best by the way that the class system has been opened up and retooled for this game, doing away with the preselected and hardwired classes of old for something more fluid and expressive. Now the likes of Soldier, Vanguard, Infiltrator and Adept are profiles that you can switch in an out of (most likely only outside of combat scenarios, much like selecting powers before battle in previous games), each of which adds some form of stat or effect boost to different areas of your skill tree. So, the Soldier profile will offer health and agility boosts and perhaps some weapon damage effects, but the all-tech Engineer profile will buff specific technology based skills like support drones, turrets or Overload attacks.





Mass Effect is a catalyst for our inner sense of discovery

This is a very different approach from a wide angle, but can be made to feel like classic *Mass Effect* if you want. While you have access to all of these profiles (plus a new Explorer profile that is unique to Ryder) you could choose, it seems to us, to stick with just one and only select abilities that compliment that choice (and Ian Frazier has clarified you can have more than three »





CODEX CHECK

SOME OF THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS YOU MAY STILL BE WONDERING ABOUT

DO SAVES CARRY OVER?

Saves will not be carrying over from the original trilogy, but never say never as that may become something to take note of in the future. As to whether saves will carry forward from *Andromeda*, that depends on how well this game does and what the next stage of the *Mass Effect* project looks like.

ANY RETURNING CHARACTERS?

The only confirmed returning voice actor is Dannah Phirman, who will be voicing the virtual intelligence of Avina aboard the Nexus, much as she did on the Citadel. Beyond that no other characters are believed to be making an appearance from previous games.

HOW IS THE JOURNEY EVEN POSSIBLE?

We were wondering much the same, when you consider that travel at high faster than light speeds in the Milky Way was only possible through the Mass Relays. It turns out that the Nexus and ark ships are equipped with ODSY Drives, newly designed engines that do not need to replenish or dump cores in the long journey between galaxies. It's fancy tech that we're sure the game will explain, but that's how it's done.

ANY RACES MISSING FROM THE MILKY WAY?

So far we know that representatives of humanity, turians, asari, salarians and krogans have definitely made the trip. So far we've not seen any drell, batarians, vorcha, geth, volus, elcor, hanar or quarians. That last one might be one of the bigger surprises, since the Andromeda Initiative mission begins, the quarians are still without a home. We'll have to see if that becomes a story later.

CAN YOU CUSTOMISE THE RYDER FAMILY?

You can customise Scott and Sara Ryder individually regardless of which one you choose to play as, and even though they're siblings they don't need to look alike. Alec Ryder's appearance will also change depending on who you choose as your lead character, but he cannot be customised directly. A little like Fallout 3 in that respect.

ARE MILKY WAY SPECIES ALREADY IN ANDROMEDA?

Some of the reveal trailers would indicate that many travellers from your home galaxy have already begun settling in the Helius Cluster, but that's not necessarily surprising. The Nexus has arrived ahead of the ark ships and we don't know how long it will have been there before your ark, the Hyperion, arrives. It could be days, weeks, months or years before you catch up with it.

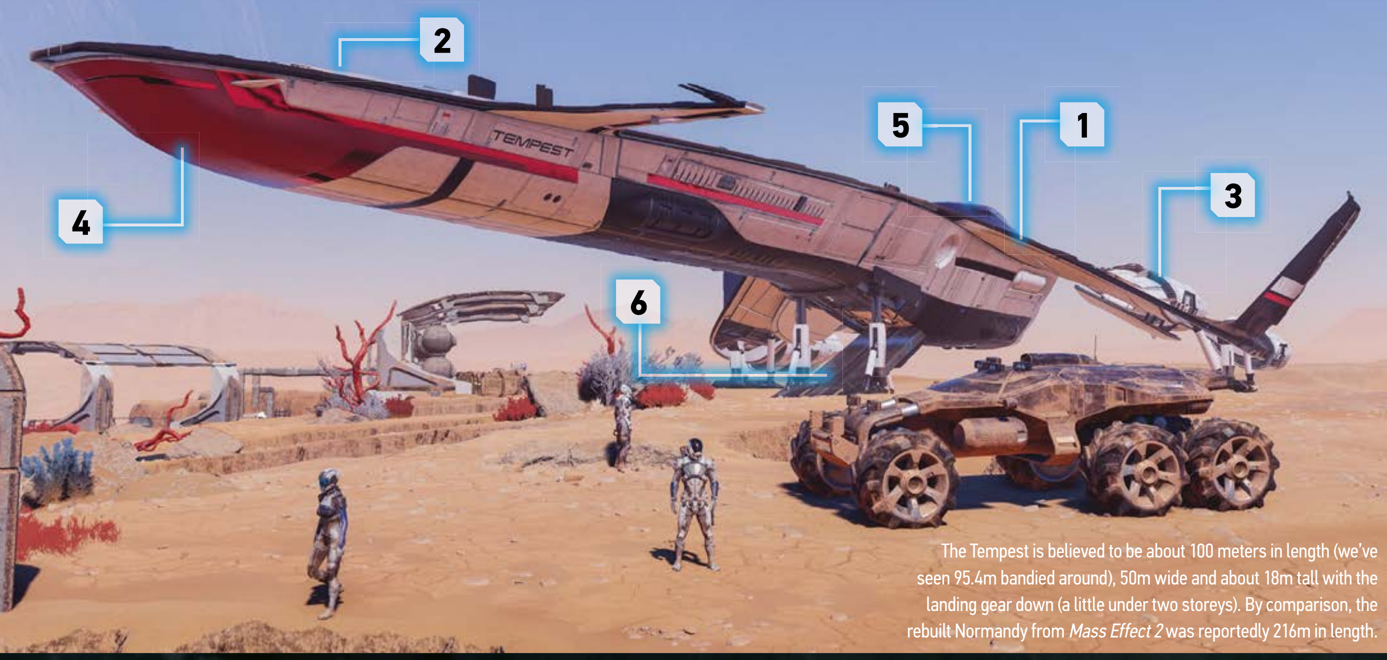
HOW BIG IS THE HELIUS CLUSTER?

While the game is called *Mass Effect Andromeda* you will seemingly be spending most of your time within the Helius Cluster looking for a new home for humanity. This is not a great surprise since Andromeda is even bigger than the Milky Way and would take far to long to travel around. Expect what you can explore to have more depth though with full planets to explore and stories to find on many.

Above Every planet you land on holds the promise of new discoveries, new mysteries and new enemies. Even the local wildlife could prove to be a major challenge for you. **Left** Ryder is not restricted to a core class base as in the previous games. Since neither twin has established themselves you are free to explore powers and upgrades freely. **Below** The kett look to be your primary adversaries in this game, taking umbrage with your arrival in their galaxy.

GETTING TO KNOW THE TEMPEST

A CLOSER LOOK AT YOUR NEW HOME IN MASS EFFECT ANDROMEDA



The Tempest is believed to be about 100 meters in length (we've seen 95.4m bandied around), 50m wide and about 18m tall with the landing gear down (a little under two storeys). By comparison, the rebuilt Normandy from *Mass Effect 2* was reportedly 216m in length.

1 BioWare has gone for what is called a cantilevered design, which means that the Tempest carries the bulk of its weight at one end so that its balancing point is off centre. For this ship it means that the landing gear can be situated at the front, leaving the nose of the fuselage suspended above the ground with the need for further support.

2 The Tempest has very light armour and no main gun for defending itself, unlike the Normandy. That means that it is in no position to defend itself against a heavy attack in space, but the lack of weight means that it is incredibly fast and manoeuvrable. This is ultimately a scouting vessel first and foremost, not a ship of war.

3 So, how fast can the Tempest travel? Well, according to its pilot, who also happens to have been one of the designers of the vessel, it can average 13 lightyears in a single day. That makes it just about as fast as the SSV Normandy (estimated to be capable of about 15 lightyears a day).

4 The bridge of the Tempest is situated at the nose of the ship and appears to be a little more spacious than we experienced in the original trilogy. In part this is because it also needs to house your starmap, which is right up front next to your pilot.

5 We believe that this is where the Pathfinder's quarters are situated with a grand view of whatever the Tempest happens to be orbiting or passing by. These quarters are significantly larger than other crew quarters.

6 The cargo bay sits at the base of the ship for easy access when driving the Nomad out on scouting missions on a new planet and for getting back on board when your journey is calling you elsewhere.





■ **Above** Civilisation and technology has developed in this region of space seemingly without the interference or direction of the Reapers (as it did in the Milky Way), so things will look very alien.

available, despite what some demo footage may suggest). Every ability tree for combat, biotics and tech can be explored freely, but to really get the best out of any one of these, some specialisation and preference for a Profile is likely to emerge. It makes sense for Ryder as a character to not be as sure of their preferences and abilities since they arrive in Andromeda as relative novices, but it also opens up choices for us as players and that's commendable. The one concern we have is that an important element of consequence to your class choice in the original games is being lost here as each choice of power and upgrade meant cutting off the option of something else. That still exists through levels four to six in each skill tree, but with profile jumping it removes some of the higher-level restrictions. It's more open and less punishing, but that may not be the best thing. That's something we'll need to wait for the full experience of the game to discover.

We'll also need to wait before we can judge another of the important pillars of the *Mass Effect* experience in this game, and that's the relationships you build with your squad. It's a smaller team than in the last couple of games – closer in size to the first title – and BioWare has promised this means more time has been spent fleshing out and giving depth to characters like Cora, Drack and Peebee so that they really mean something to you by the end. In a recent video by Lucas Raycevik on YouTube titled '*Mass Effect*… 10 Years Later' it was pointed out that *Mass Effect* is at its best when you're listening and we couldn't agree more. For all of its RPG mechanics, combat and physical exploration, it's the exploration of characters around you, the conversations that you can share and the things that you discover through those interactions that stick with you. The likes of Vetra and Liam Kosta may not be able to live up to Liara and Garrus, but they've got a fighting chance if this aspect of the series remains solid.

> "In the past this series has allowed you to explore and express your own feelings, being as compassionate or bullish as you wish"

The conversation system, having lost its Paragon and Renegade values but earning some nuance in the process, promises to hold true to that most important test of the Western RPG; can you talk yourself out of trouble? It's one of the features we look to in any conversation-driven role-playing experience and having removed the black and white approaches of the past, *Andromeda*'s path to such results may not be as easy to find, but hopefully more rewarding in the process. It's another example of how a more open approach to a classic feature should offer broader opportunities to learn and discover this new galaxy as you play, something that's being nicely integrated into the co-op and multiplayer experience too.

■ The addition of a jetpack should make traversal of hostile worlds much easier, but also seems to combine fluidly with combat for some amazing aerial combinations.



BioWare hasn't revealed too much about how multiplayer in this game will ultimately work other than saying that it is not essential to any options in the single-player campaign (as it was for War Readiness in *Mass Effect 3*), but will offer bonuses across modes. What we've been able to devise thus far is that the online component of the game ties into your settlement building as areas colonised by the Andromeda Initiative either come under attack or become embroiled in internal conflict. At this point you 'join the fray' by picking an alien race and specific class to play as, just like *ME3*. In this way it seems likely that you could, if you really wanted to, only play the multiplayer of *Andromeda*.

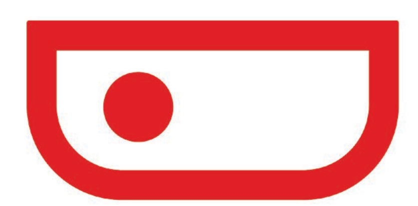
PvP and PvE are the core gameplay styles as you take on other colonists or attempt to survive against waves of enemies, capturing key defensive positions as you go. The abilities of the colonists look to have been rewritten a little from the past, with some noticing in a recent reveal that a krogan biotic had a shield rather than using the power-specific barrier. There are likely to be a few tweaks like this from the past as this new region for the series offers a chance to reassess a lot of the rules set down before. BioWare has also confirmed that there are no dedicated servers, with games being peer to peer, which may frustrate some but makes sense in reducing the financial burden on BioWare to keep online servers running. If this aspect of the game really grows and is embraced by everyone then perhaps that might change, but as a continued experiment in what *Mass Effect* multiplayer can be, this seems like the responsible approach to us.

And so now we must just wait, but thankfully not too long. *Mass Effect Andromeda* is a hugely ambitious project for a number of reasons. In scope it looks to offers something with greater detail and depth than the previous games. It needs to live up to and build on that legacy. It has new characters to establish that have a very high bar to meet. It has a new world to flesh out and justify. There's so much to go out there and find, which as we've said, is really the thing that makes *Mass Effect* so enjoyable. BioWare is so consistently good at creating a world and characters we care about – as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* proved yet again of late – we remain optimistic this can be something special and challenging. And as producer Fabrice Condominas pointed out on Twitter recently, "More important than the journey itself is who you share it with."


Splatoon 2
NINTENDO SWITCH
TV
tabletop

SWITCH LAUNCH SPECIAL

WE BREAK DOWN THE TECH, THE GAMES AND GIVE OUR HANDS-ON IMPRESSIONS OF NINTENDO'S LATEST CONSOLE



The Nintendo Switch is one of the most impressive devices the Japanese manufacturer has ever released in terms of its consumer design as well as its functionality. It may not have the instant game-changing interface of something like the Wii, but it is a perfection of the play anywhere philosophy that the company appeared to be striving for with the Wii U. The Switch is more than just a portable console that can be screened on a TV, too. There are many interesting and fun features included on the console that allow it to be a multifaceted and versatile machine.

It is not as powerful as a PlayStation 4 or Xbox One, but compared to other dedicated handheld devices out there, it blows them out of the water with a larger screen, greater processing power and more storage. As you look at the launch titles and those planned for the rest of 2017, you can see that this is a machine that truly straddles the divide between handheld and home console with games that would be welcome in either format.

But before we get too much further, we should take a closer look at the machine itself, its specs, how it stands up to the competition and what its best features actually are.

THE PRICING

A quick look at what the console and all of its accessories will cost you

Nintendo Switch
£279.99







Joy-Con twin-pack
£69.99

Left/Right Joy-Con
£39.99

Joy-Con Wheel pair
£12.99



Joy-Con Charging Grip Controller
£24.99

Joy-Con Carry Case
£16.99

Nintendo Switch Pro Controller
£59.99





Joy-Con Strap
£4.99



> Compared to other dedicated handheld devices out there, it blows them out of the water

Capacitive Multi-Touch Screen 6.2 inches diagonally, 720p resolution. It allows for multiple points of interaction, just like a regular tablet. A step up from interactivity from the 3DS too.

Minus Button A secondary menu button, most likely to be used for inventories and maps in various games.

Plus Button Acts more or less the same as your standard Start button or Menu button for pausing games, bringing up options menus or opening inventories.

Joy-Con (L) Includes an analogue stick and directional buttons that double as face buttons for two-player games.

Capture Button The left Joy-Con has a simple capture button for instantly grabbing and sharing images and video from your favourite Switch games.

Home Button The right Joy-Con has a classic home button, a feature of Nintendo consoles since the Wii.

Joy-Con (R) Includes the same analogue stick and face buttons as well as an infrared motion camera at the base that is sensitive enough to read hand gestures and a near-field sensor for reading Amiibos.

SWITCH VS HOME CONSOLES

HOW IT STACK UP UNDER YOUR TV

	Nintendo Switch	PlayStation 4	Xbox One
CPU Cores	4	8	8
CPU Clock Speed	1020MHz	1,600MHz	1,750MHz
GPU Cores	256 Nvidia CUDA	1152 AMD Shaders	768x AMD Shaders
GPU speed (docked)	768MHz	800MHz	853MHz
GPU speed (undocked)	307.2MHz	N/A	N/A
Memory	4GB	8GB	8GB
Storage	32GB flash	500GB HDD	500GB HDD
Video Output	HDMI	HDMI	HDMI
Audio Output	N/A	Optical	Optical
Networking ports	N/A	Gigabit Ethernet	Gigabit Ethernet





■ **Game Card Slot** For all physical releases, games are also region free, which will likely delight dedicated game importers.

■ **Base Unit** This is essentially a dock and doesn't really offer any additional functionality to the Switch handheld unit other than being an extension for power and video ports. The back cover flips down to reveal all the ports so that cables can be tidied away.

JOY-CON FOCUS

While the headline grabbing feature of the Switch is its functionality as a home console that can be played as a handheld device, the Joy-Cons are actually the feature of the console that impresses us the most. These small controller units that can be used with the Switch in multiple configurations offer so many more styles of control and play than we could have anticipated. If gaming on the move is the Switch's opening gambit, the Joy-Cons could well be the feature that gives the console longer life past launch. Here are the key details:

■ **THREE WAYS TO PLAY:** As a standard controller, the Joy-Cons offer three ways of interacting with the console. They can be attached to the Joy-Con Grip controller for easy wireless play, they can be held free in each hand as controllers or they can be slid into the screen unit itself for portable gaming.

■ **HD RUMBLE:** Of the many quietly brilliant features of the Joy-Cons, the HD rumble you'll find in them is among the most enjoyable. As anyone who picks up 1-2-Switch will discover, the controllers have a fidelity of force feedback unlike anything you've felt in a console controller to date. It offers a sense of tactility to gaming we've not experienced before.

■ **MINI CONTROLLERS:** As well as being used as the left and right hand of a standard controller for most games, the individual Joy-Cons can also act independently as single controllers, which is fantastic for relatively simple games (like *Mario Kart*) or virtual console versions of Nintendo classics.

■ **MOTION CONTROLLERS:** It was almost a surprise to hear that the Joy-Cons would also double as motion controllers since it felt as if Nintendo had rather left that concept behind with the Wii, but each features a gyroscope and accelerometer for judging motion. There's no camera or sensor on the Switch to read these movements, but the internal sensors seem to do a pretty amazing job as it stands.

■ **WRISTBAND MAGIC:** An essential addition for using motion controllers is obviously having them attached to your wrist (not that these are anywhere near as heavy or dangerous as the original Wii Remotes), but what the wristbands also do is make each Joy-Con a more complete controller on their own, covering up the sliding mechanism that attaches them to the main Switch unit and adding two shoulder buttons.

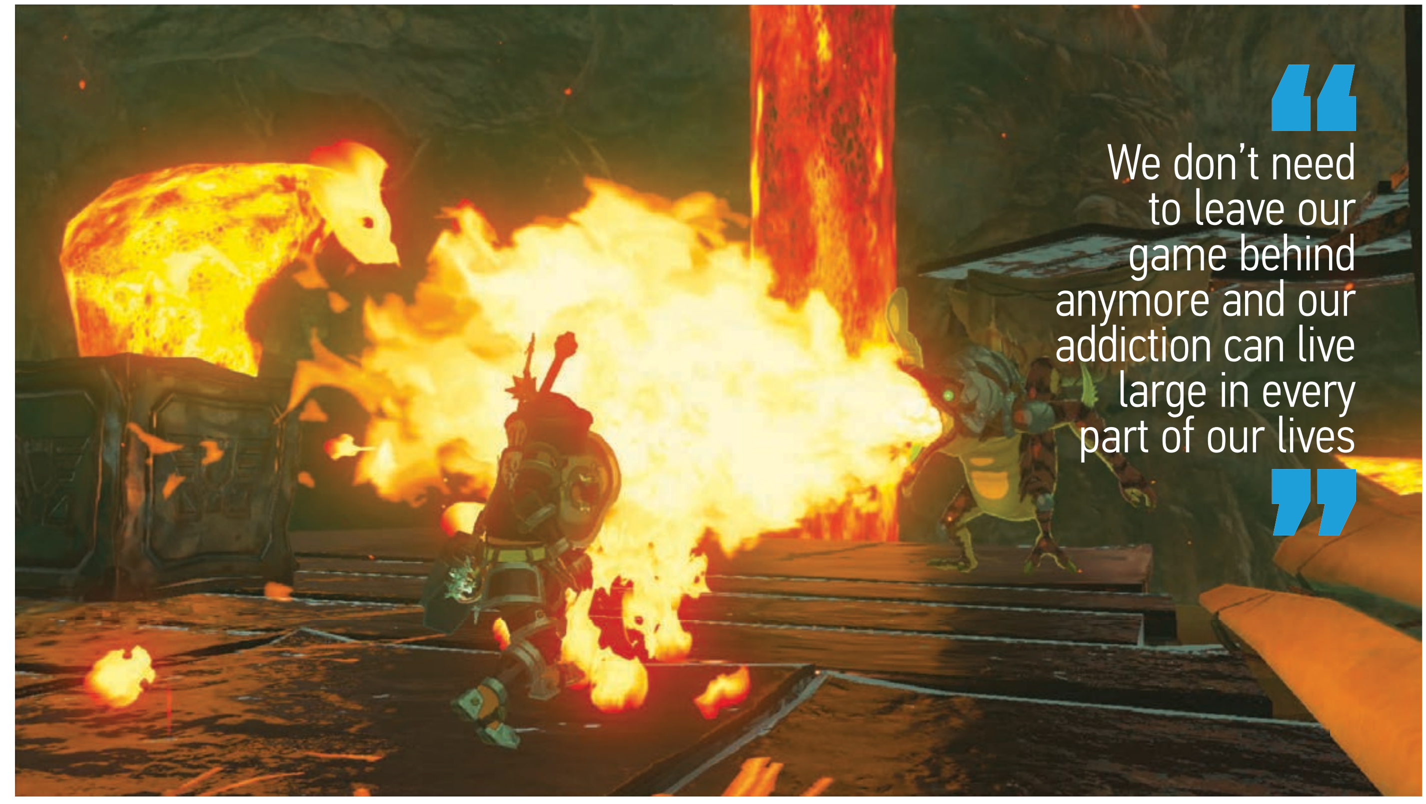


SWITCH VS HANDHELDS

HOW IT STACKS UP ON THE MOVE

	Nintendo Switch	PlayStation Vita	New Nintendo 3DS XL
CPU Cores	4	4	4
CPU Clock Speed	1020MHz	444MHz	268MHz
Memory	4GB	512MB (plus 128MB VRAM)	256MB (plus 10MB VRAM)
Screen	6.2 inches	5 inches	4.88 inches (4.18 inches lower screen)
Screen Resolution	1280 x 720 @ 237 ppi	960 × 544 @ 220 ppi	800×240 & 320×240 pixels bottom screen
Touch Screen	Capacitive Multi-touch	Capacitive Multi-touch	Resistive Touch Screen
Cameras	N/A	Front and rear	Front Infrared and rear 3D camera
Motion control	gyroscope and accelerometer	three-axis gyroscope, three-axis accelerometer	gyroscope
Storage	32GB flash	1GB	1GB
Battery life	2.5-6 hours	3-5 hours	3.5-7 hours





We don't need to leave our game behind anymore and our addiction can live large in every part of our lives





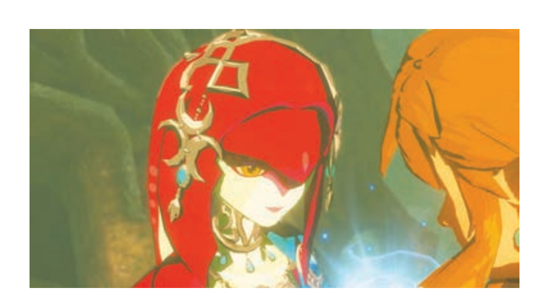
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

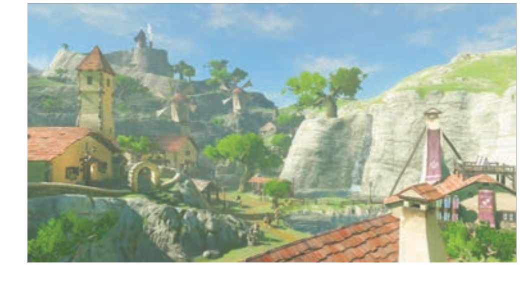
PUBLISHER: Nintendo **DEVELOPER:** Nintendo EPD **RELEASE DATE:** 3 March

Nintendo will likely be hoping that the trick of releasing *Zelda* across two generations to have it be a launch game will pay dividends as *Breath Of The Wild* follows in the footsteps of *Twilight Princess*. We're not yet prepared to predict the Switch will hit the same levels of success as the Nintendo Wii, however, but it was the last time a brand new *Zelda* landed with a console and it's impressive now as a way to kick off a new piece of technology as it was then.

Link's latest adventure has been ramping up interest and excitement nicely and our final hands-on with the game has only gone on to confirm that the Switch is the best way to experience the game. We knew all about the massive open world and cooking systems, the custom outfits and slick combat, but what we didn't know yet was how gorgeous it would look on the Switch's fantastic screen. It may only be 720p, but on the 6.2-inch screen every colour pops and the outlines are crisp. The art style Nintendo has pursued is paying off in delivering a game that looks like more than the sum of the console's processing power.

Playing on a big screen still feels like the best way to experience *Breath Of The Wild*, but the Joy-Cons or Pro Controller are definitely nicer to use than the Wii U Gamepad, so that's already a step up. And while the full majesty of Hyrule may be lost a little on the smaller screen, the amount of content in the world offers plenty of short, sharp distractions that are well suited to mobile play. All of this adds up to what promises to be another epic journey, as all *Zelda* games tend to be. So, whether on the move or played at home, *Breath Of The Wild* feels like everything we could have wanted.







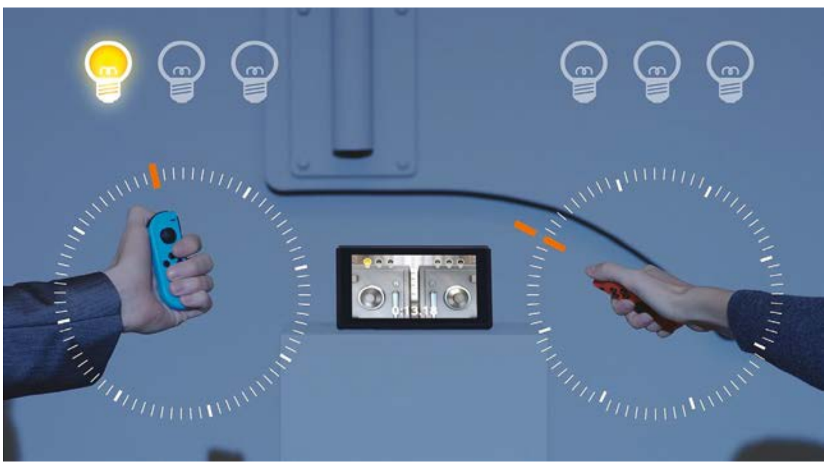


1-2-SWITCH

PUB: Nintendo **DEV:** Nintendo EPD **RELEASE:** Winter 2017

On the surface we weren't expecting much from this game when we first heard about it, offering as it does some rather light experiences involving motion control on the Joy-Cons. Plus the concept of playing a game where you're not really supposed to be looking at the screen, but rather at a second player, felt counterintuitive. However, playing through the mini-games of this multiplayer-focused collection reveals a set of ingenious experiences that simultaneously make the gameplay about playing against your opponent face to face and show off the incredible accuracy of the Joy-Cons. It should perhaps have been bundled with the console as standard, but if you want a good game to share with friends and family whether they're gamers or not, this is it.







SUPER BOMBERMAN R

PUB: Konami, HexaDrive **DEV:** Konami **RELEASE:** 3 March

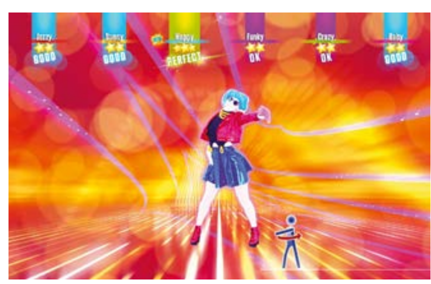
No one wants to mess around with the *Bomberman* formula, of course, but it could perhaps do with a little bit of variety with this release. From our early hands-on with the game we enjoyed the classic bombing action a lot, but would have liked to have seen some new innovations mixed into the experience. Hopefully there's more to come.



SKYLANDERS: IMAGINATORS

PUB: Activision **DEV:** Toys For Bob **RELEASE:** 3 March

No great surprise to see this toys-to-life titles make the transition to Switch, not least because Nintendo itself has become so well associated with the RFID accessory game through the Amiibos. The latest *Skylanders* isn't the greatest, but the chance to play it on the move may open up the Switch to some fans who maybe didn't grab a copy before Christmas.



JUST DANCE 2017

PUB: Ubisoft **DEV:** Ubisoft Paris, Pune **RELEASE:** 3 March

As one of the last surviving franchises of the great motion gaming boom, *Just Dance* continues to be a guilty pleasure on the games™ team, but what it's badly missed on most systems is integrated motion controls on its platforms. The Joy-Cons do the job very nicely.



FAST RMX

PUB: Shin'en Multimedia **DEV:** In-house **RELEASE:** TBC March

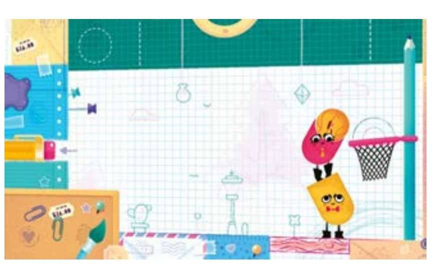
A great mix of *F-Zero* or *WipEout* style gameplay with a colour switching mechanic that forces you to anticipate upcoming boost and jump pads and match your stance accordingly. The pace of the game is intense, but it works great in split-screen and can be played on a single Joy-Con as far as we can tell.



FIFA

PUB: EA **DEV:** EA Canada **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

EA hasn't revealed much about its plans for *FIFA* on Switch, but since it hasn't yet outlined its plans for *FIFA 18* there's every chance it will be a version of its regular release. Then again it may attempt a more bespoke approach that makes use of Joy-Con multiplayer, closer to the mobile versions of the game.



SNIPPERCLIPS

PUB: Nintendo **DEV:** Nintendo, SFB Games **RELEASE:** TBC March

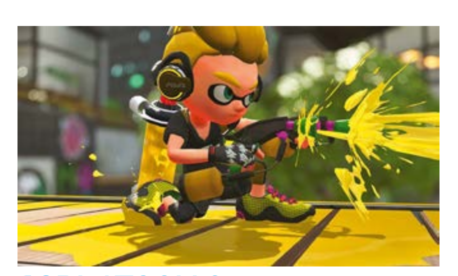
This is a very fun and colourful co-op puzzler where you must use the shape of your character to cut into your partner in order to reach buttons, hold objects and several other tasks that are needed to complete the level. It's all about escaping one room to reach the next and it plays beautifully on the Switch's detached controllers.



MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

PUB: Nintendo **DEV:** Nintendo EAD **RELEASE:** 28 April

It's a shame that it's missing the launch day by almost two months, but we're hoping this is Nintendo anticipating that we're all going to be rather busy playing *Zelda* and once we finally lift our heads out of Hyrule we'll be looking for something a little more communal to play. This special edition of *Mario Kart 8* adds new characters and Battle Mode courses. There's already a bunch of characters to pick from as well as vehicle options for every racer and different bonus items to pick from. But how does it play on the Switch? Fantastic in every variation. It pops beautifully on the Switch screen, it works just as well in portable split-screen and it upscales nicely to HD TVs. Already looks like an essential purchase.



SPLATOON 2

PUB: Nintendo **DEV:** Nintendo EAD **RELEASE:** Summer 2017

As a sequel to the much-loved Wii U breakthrough hit, careful iteration seems to be the name of the game. Nintendo is eager to keep as much of its core-gameplay tenants untouched as possible; so while that limits innovation, the truth is the leap to Switch is overwhelming positive. It feels comfortable to play with both the Joy-Cons and Pro controller – the gyroscope-camera control working well in both configurations – while the action feels faster and smoother.



RIME

PUB: Grey Box/ Six Foot **DEV:** Tequila Works **RELEASE:** May 2017

There's something immediately appealing to playing Tequila Works' Rime on Switch. As an experience focussed wholeheartedly on exploration, puzzles and platforming, the ability to take the adventure from TV to bed is inviting – the game's beautiful score and visuals helping to calm you before the long sleep. As long as you are able to give it your undivided attention, Rime is suited to playing in both home and mobile conditions.



HAS-BEEN HEROES

PUB: GameTrust **DEV:** Frozenbyte **RELEASE:** TBC March

Has-Been Heroes feels like one of those releases you'd expect to see released (and subsequently buried) on the PlayStation Vita. It looks gorgeous, handles well and knows its niche, playing to the action-strategy crowd without hesitation. Managing a small group of has-been heroes along a static path, it's up to you to manage lanes filled with powerful enemies in real-time while diving in and out of punishingly quick turn-based battles. It's tough, but immediately engaging.





REDOUT

PUB: 34BigThings **DEV:** In-house **RELEASE:** Spring 2017

More high-speed racing action in the tradition of *Rollcage*, *F-Zero* and *WipEout*, 34BigThings' tribute to the genre is built on Unreal Engine 4 to deliver some stunning visuals along with its epic speeds. It has a bag-load of game modes, plenty of tracks and a story mode if you fancy giving that a go.



NBA 2K18

PUB: Bethesda 2K Games **DEV:** Visual Concepts **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

Another game that was hinted at in early Switch promotion, we'll be interested to see how it adapts to possibly using the single Joy-Cons for local multiplayer action. Could we see the glory days of *NBA Jam* brought up to date by *2K*? We're certainly hoping for something like that.



DISGAEA 5 COMPLETE

PUB: NIS America **DEV:** Nippon Ichi Software, Inc **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

We're big fans of the *Disgaea* series, so seeing this special edition land on Switch was always going to make us happy. Additional in-game content including new scenarios and classic characters is definitely welcome. It's also a great game for taking around on the move. A great post-*Zelda* treat.



SHOVEL KNIGHT: TREASURE TROVE

PUB: Yacht Club Games **DEV:** In-house **RELEASE:** April 2017

This retro-inspired indie has travelled the console and PC scene and is naturally making the move to Switch, where its hero already has an Amiibo. The one big change that's happening is that the game is being restructured somewhat with the DLC expansions now being made standalone titles. Still worth grabbing them bundled.



THE BINDING OF ISAAC: AFTERBIRTH+

PUB: Nicalis, Inc **DEV:** In-house **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

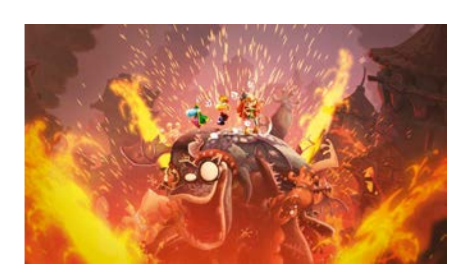
It's fantastic to see this title making the move to Switch, no least because we've already had the odd dirty look on public transport from fellow commuters who saw us playing it on other devices. They just don't seem to understand. Anyway, this special edition comes with loads of new items, a new chapter and boss new challenges and more.



THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

PUB: Bethesda Softworks **DEV:** Bethesda Game Studios **RELEASE:** Fall 2017

We felt pretty sure that Bethesda would be bringing its epic RPG to the Switch since it was used as part of the promotion of the system, but Bethesda didn't want to commit. No reason to be coy about it any longer as we now know we'll be able to explore this corner of Tamriel on the move thanks to this new system. We need hype it no more than that.



RAYMAN LEGENDS: DEFINITIVE EDITION

PUB: Ubisoft **DEV:** Ubisoft Montpellier **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

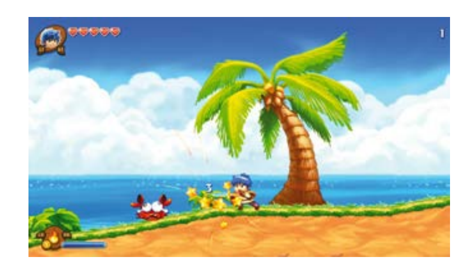
Great to see this platformer make the move to Switch, not least because its gorgeous art style and bright design will look fantastic on the console's handheld screen. It's a shame that it won't be a new *Rayman* (or a different Michel Ancel release), but this is a nice addition to the lineup for anyone who hasn't had the chance to play it elsewhere.



ULTRA STREET FIGHTER II: THE FINAL CHALLENGERS

PUB: Capcom **DEV:** In-house **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

It may look a lot like a repackaging of *Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix*, but Capcom has had a whole new team working on this release, the first Nintendo *Street Fighter* in six years and a wonderful throwback to the original title's fantastic success on SNES. The addition of graphical modes and Violent Ken are nice fan touches too.



MONSTER BOY AND THE CURSED KINGDOM

PUB: FDG Entertainment **DEV:** Game Atelier **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

This spiritual successor to *Wonder Boy* was announced as a Switch game long before Nintendo had even confirmed what the name of the console was going to be, let alone dated its release. Transform into different creatures as you battle your way through a series of action platforming levels. It's already shaping up very nicely.





PROJECT SONIC 2017

PUB: Sega **DEV:** Sonic Team **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

We're yet to get too many details about how the *Sonic* Team will be looking to get the 3D *Sonic* formula right this year, but it would appear that it will be following in the footsteps of *Sonic Generations* with both old and new Sonic incarnations sharing the screen time. We'll be keeping our fingers crossed.



STEEP

PUB: Ubisoft **DEV:** Ubisoft Annecy **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

Ubisoft's extreme sports title had much to enjoy, but was perhaps a little muddled. On the Switch it has a chance of updating a few features, perhaps adding some new content and also bringing its impressive exploration gameplay to a mobile device. This could be a great second chance for the game.



LEGO CITY: UNDERCOVER

PUB: Nintendo **DEV:** TT Fusion **RELEASE:** Spring 2017

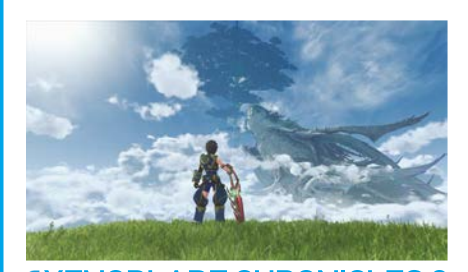
Having originally been released back in 2013 on the Wii U, *LEGO City Undercover* will be landing on Switch as a rather old LEGO title, but still one with a good reputation for its sandbox design and humour. What we really want to see is *LEGO Dimensions* though or even *LEGO Worlds*.

ARMS

PUB: Nintendo **DEV:** In-house **RELEASE:** Spring 2017

A brand new title from Nintendo and one that is apparently already garnering a fanbase among those who have fallen in love with the character design and art style. As it stand, this is predominantly a twist on motion control boxing with the Joy-Cons offering far more control and finesse than we experienced playing *Wii Sports*. With long, extendable arms you can throw your fists over long distances, turning the punch into your opponent if they dodge the attack. It plays very nicely, looks fantastic up on a TV and is apparently also playable without motion controls, which is probably a good thing. Don't want too many non-portable experiences on this hybrid console.





XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 2

PUB: Nintendo **DEV:** Monolith Soft **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

Showing off Nintendo's commitment to releasing massive console titles on Switch to be enjoyed on the move, the arrival of a full sequel to *Xenoblade Chronicles* is a welcome surprise. The game will focus on a new character in the same world and appears to be embracing a slightly more cartoonish art style.



FIRE EMBLEM WARRIORS

PUB: Koei Tecmo Games **DEV:** Omega Force, Team Ninja **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

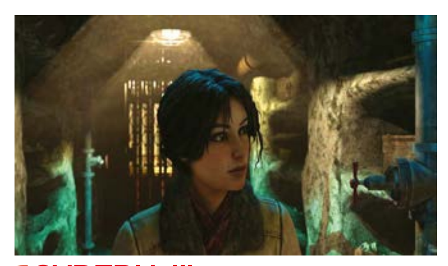
The relationship between Nintendo and Tecmo Koei appears to growing stronger following the success of *Hyrule Warriors* as its Omega team brings some of the *Dynasty Warriors* magic to the world of *Fire Emblem*. And just like its predecessor, this game will be appearing on the 3DS too, continuing Nintendo's commitment to that device.



SONIC MANIA

PUB: Sega **DEV:** Headcannon, PagodaWest Games **RELEASE:** Spring 2017

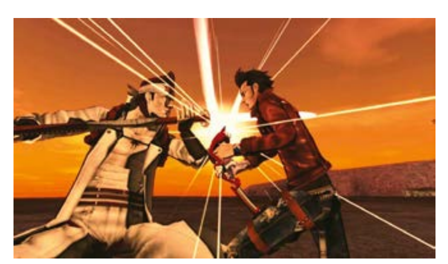
We all know the story behind this game by now because it's a big part of why it excites us so much as fans of the series have been given the reins to create a 2D *Sonic* experience like the ones we've come to idolise. Everything we've seen says that the development is going well, so this should be on everyone's watch list.



SYBERIA III

PUB: Microïds **DEV:** In-house **RELEASE:** Spring 2017

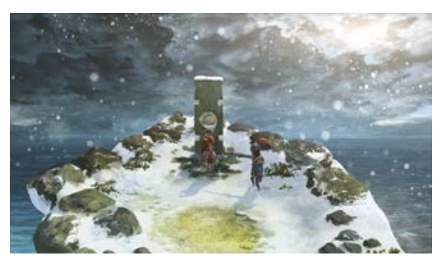
The steampunk adventure odyssey has actually been in the works for almost eight years as protracted negotiations and shifts in development have seen the title pushed back. It does however have a very keen fanbase and is looking like a fantastic update to the franchise that began in 2002.



NO MORE HEROES 3

PUB: TBC **DEV:** Grasshopper Manufacture **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

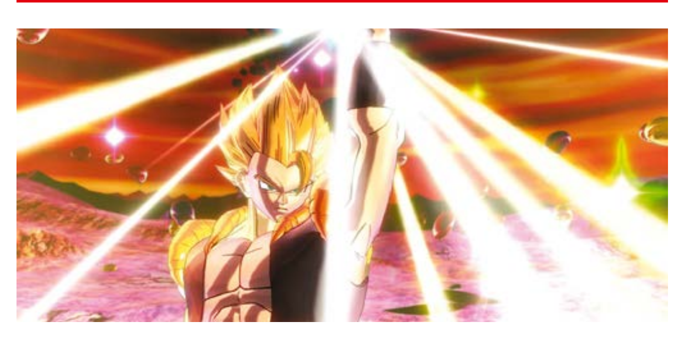
Suda51 wasted no time to say that he had a sequel to *No More Heroes* in the works for Switch, which is fantastic news. No word yet on whether Ubisoft will be coming back as publisher or exactly what gameplay we can expect, but the Joy-Con motion controls in Suda's hands sounds full of potential to us.



I AM SETSUNA

PUB: Square Enix **DEV:** Tokyo RPG Factory **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

It got a lot of hype before release as a potential successor to *Chrono Trigger*, but while it didn't quite live up to that billing, *I Am Setsuna* is still one of the most enjoyable and engaging JRPGs released in recent memory. The wonderfully illustrative style of the game and its tight gameplay should serve it well on Switch.



DRAGON BALL XENOVERSE 2

PUB: Bandai Namco **DEV:** Dimps **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

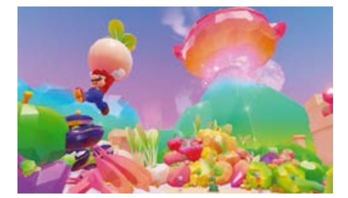
The insane combat gameplay of this *Dragon Ball* series continues to go about its business is a relatively unheralded way, but it has perfected the anime to 3D graphical interpretation nicely and adds another solid fighting action experience to Switch's lineup. Expect *Naruto* and more to follow in its footsteps.

SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

PUB: Nintendo **DEV:** Nintendo EPD **RELEASE:** Winter 2017

Arriving in good time to see the Switch enjoy a big holiday push against whatever Microsoft and Sony can throw at it, Mario's new adventure looks like one of the most bizarre and fascinating to date. As the first classic 3D action platformer in the series since *Super Mario Sunshine*, it really has been a long time since we've really been able to explore Mario's surroundings and explore the worlds he visits. The breadth of new gameplay mechanics and abilities is only highlighted by the locations such as the New York-inspired city he clearly visits. There will be a lot of attention on this release, but *Mario* has rarely let us down.







PUYO PUYO TETRIS

PUB: Sega **DEV:** Sonic Team **RELEASE:** Spring 2017

This hybrid of two classic puzzle franchises being made by *Sonic* Team uses the mechanisms of both in a battle gameplay experience. Sometimes you might be able to throw your pieces onto the opposing player's board (who is playing the other game) or maybe it will switch between games. It all depends on which game mode you pick.



MINECRAFT

PUB: Microsoft **DEV:** Mojang, 4J Studios **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

Some of the buzz around *Minecraft* has fallen away of late, but while the *Pocket Editions* of the game have been fun, they're not as content complete as those on PC or console, so having a console-packed version on Switch could prove to be a massive new update. Hardcore fans will likely find much to love on the new hardware.



STARDEW VALLEY

PUB: Chucklefish Games **DEV:** ConcernedApe **RELEASE:** TBC 2017

We're as happy to see this farming RPG land on Switch as just about everything else since leaving it behind on our PCs or consoles was always a wrench. Now, on the Switch, we don't need to leave our game behind anymore and our addiction can live large in every part of our lives. On reflection, maybe that's not a good thing. Oh well,



DANGER CLOSE

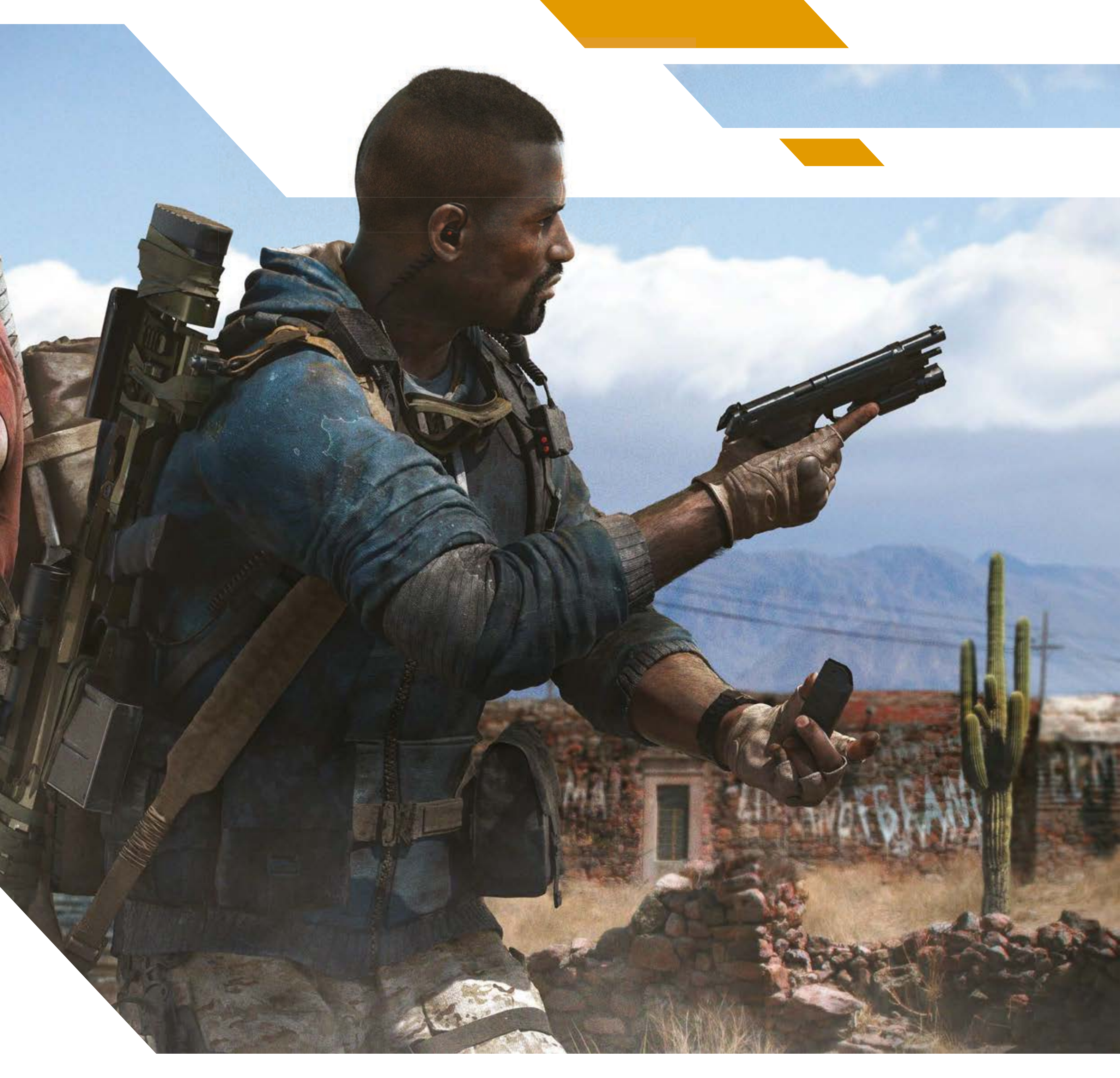
FINAL VERDICT

IS **GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS** FIT FOR SERVICE?

Rhythmic, now that's the word to describe it; the devilish hum of rotary blades slicing through a still Bolivian sky. We're soaring high above the beautiful Altiplano of South America, instructed to investigate the Montuyuc region and any connection it may have to the Santa Blanca drug cartel. Intel is light, though Karen Bowman (our dour CIA-appointed case handler) indicates that El Muro – recently named Head of Security by cartel king El Sueño – has taken control of the region by force; the civilians forced to add oppression to a laundry list of grievances that already includes exploitation, poverty and living in a state of perpetual fear.

The cartel is using the harsh salt flatlands and surrounding mountain plateau as a training ground for an army – a hit squad trained by traitors to the United States military – in an effort to further protect the traffic of cocaine travelling out of the country and across the border into Mexico. This kind of operation should take weeks to plan but we have just minutes to pull it together.

Montuyuc is, after all, just one of the 21 different regions we need to restore peace to, and this just one of over a hundred missions on the docket. El Muro is just one of the 26 bosses protecting El Sueño and it's down to just the four of us to get the job done, in any way that we see fit. We are Ghosts caught in an otherworldly hellscape of fire and ice, of wind and rain, and nothing will stop us from succeeding. Except, perhaps, Ghost 4. He is currently racing across the Laguna Colorada in a 4x4 while we attempt to prepare for an aerial assault on a military complex; his banal chatter across the shared communication line is deafening. It's difficult to find good help these days.



FILLING IN THE BLANKS

If we're being completely honest, what came next was a little surprising. No, not the contents of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands* – the latest attempt by Ubisoft to chip away at the dated constructs of open-world game design – but because **games™** was sat down opposite the game's narrative director. Although that isn't surprising in and of itself, you will hopefully better understand our confusion once you consider the wider ambitions at the heart of the *Wildlands* experience.

It isn't that *Wildlands* doesn't have a story to tell *per se*, it just isn't being written or delivered in the conventional sense. Ubisoft is utilising its sprawling sandbox – the largest open world it has ever created – to allow players to construct a narrative for themselves. That's a lot of faith to put on the shoulders of players, especially those who are simply looking to enjoy shooting faceless cocaine peddlers in this light take on the tactical shooter genre.

Wildlands has all of the familiar Ubisoft quirks of course; all of the poorly scripted characters you've come to expect, cutscenes that occasionally push the story forward at irregular intervals and a map filled with a maddening number of items to check off the completion list. But the familiarity stops there. The presentation and execution of *Wildlands* is wildly different to anything that has come before it; the pieces of the narrative puzzle are all on the table but the way in which you assemble them isn't predetermined. Whether you end up with the full picture or a jumbled mess is dependent on your expectations, intentions and decisions throughout the game.

"From the very beginning we knew we wanted you to be able to jump back and forth between solo, private and public co-op for

the whole thing, for every mission in the game," Sam Strachman begins to tell us, citing the huge challenge that faced developer Ubisoft Paris as it embarked on its first *Tom Clancy* project since 2012's divisive *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier*. "In order to build narration around that we needed to open up everything as much as possible.

"One of our big pillars of design from the very beginning was the idea of freedom of choice. What's interesting about all of our missions is what we call the '360 approach to design'. We give you the objective and then how you do it is totally up to you. It's as simple as that: here is the objective, now go and do it."

It's true, that freedom of choice is the backbone to the entire experience of *Wildlands*. Everything from the flow of the story to your play style, from whom you want to play with to which missions you choose to tackle, it is all adaptable – able to bend to your will. *Wildlands* is eager to please in this respect, though those that crave structure may find themselves out of their depth. *Wildlands* is a game where wild creativity is rewarded, though entirely reliant on communication and control, while coasting through (even if accidentally) is seemingly punished with an experience that lacks variation or excitement.

Following a short introductory mission, *Wildlands* is essentially open. Over 100 story missions populate a map split into 21 distinct regions, with difficulty scaling and spiking across each depending on the strength of particular cartel operations – split between Production, Smuggling, Security and Influence. Each mission can be tackled in any order from the outset and replayed immediately, in either solo (joined by three AI teammates) or co-operatively in private or public matchmaking (with up to three other players), with seamless character progression following you between all configurations.

"We give you the objective, we give you all the toys in this sandbox, and then you play how you want," says Strachman. "It really is about creative decision making. There are so many variables and variations in that depending on what weapons you are using, how you have your drone equipped, what terrain you are on, and how many people you are playing with. There are just so many factors that change that experience with each mission. We just wanted to be as open as possible."

The problem here, ultimately, is that it is essentially impossible to build a cohesive narrative or paced adventure around such a free-flowing structure. The traditional three-act plot structure has been completely abandoned in an attempt to allow players to jump in and out of co-op without restriction, and to keep *Wildlands*' co-operative ambitions alive.

Every action builds towards a climactic encounter with one of the main bosses, while random world events and assisting the local rebels can be used to increase your resource pool. Every action is, in effect, a self-contained story, though they are propelled forward by petulant NPC dialogue and simple (largely uninteresting) mission parameters. Ubisoft is intent, then, to let players create their own stories and forge their own personal anecdotes while adventuring across the 11 gorgeous biomes – from snowy mountains and dense jungles, to harsh salt flats and imposing canyons. At times this works, at other times it can make the game feel at odds with itself.

With *Wildlands* being so open-ended, it ultimately means that there is very little to drive you forward outside of personal intuition. So much of the experience is to be shaped by your own hand – from your approach to each of the missions to your choice of weapon loadouts and appearance – that it can be all too easy to become content. Shifting infiltration strategies and insertion points on the fly



BUILD A BETTER SOLDIER

A WILD AMOUNT OF CUSTOMISATION

One of the pillars of *Ghost Recon: Wildlands*' design is centred on customisation and flexibility. This shines through most successfully in the game's Character Smith and Gun Smith systems, in which you are able to make sweeping changes to your Ghost at almost any time to help tailor *Wildlands* to your own personal experience.

"You will be able to craft your own Ghost to your image. In the Character Smith you will be able to choose the gender, the ethnicity, how they look, their gear and their clothes," notes creative director Eric Couzian on how you are able to customise your Ghost from the start across 12 different elements.

"We [also] have the Gun Smith where you'll be able to customise your weapon. We have a lot of combinations that are available, you can change every part of the weapon and, as you play the way that you want, you can customise your weapons depending on your own play style.

That's something of an understatement. Gun Smith will let you tinker with over 50 customisable weapons throughout the game – from assault and sniper rifles, to LMGs, pistols, shotguns and SMGs – with more than 100 attachments in the shape of scopes, stocks, barrels and magazines. These can then also be customised further with skins, many of which are unlocked by completing certain missions, to bring even more personality to co-op sessions.



> We wanted to take Ghost Recon to a new level
> **Eric Couzian, creative director**

Wildlands is the largest, most responsive open world Ubisoft has ever created, with 21 different regions coming together to create a fictionalised Bolivia that has one foot in reality.

Ghost Recon: Wildlands features over 60 vehicles: boats, motorbikes, trucks, SUVs, cars, helicopters, aeroplanes, off-road buggies and even tractors. The mantra is "if you can see it you can steal it."

is all well and good, but – much like in *Far Cry 4* and *Just Cause 3* – *Wildlands* can risk becoming bland in spite of its freedom.

This is a game that requires active thought and consideration at all times, demands it even, and those that lack the creativity or the drive to explore new methods of play may find the lack of a set narrative to be less engaging than the solution Ubisoft Paris desperately wants you to find. Then again, those that love to create chaos with friends for the purpose of Twitch streams and YouTube montages may just fall in love with the uninhibited carnage that you're able to dutifully command.

BACK IN ACTION

The plan of attack: to tackle the Full Load mission quickly and efficiently. We were to move in perfect sync, the pull of our triggers to be thunderously rhythmic. Four mortar shell crates needed to be destroyed, but Ghost 1's quick deployment of a drone revealed a base crawling with enemy soldiers. Armoured vehicles and turret emplacements guarded the obvious entry points while watchtowers overlooked the surrounding flatland – Ghost 4 was nowhere to be seen.

We worked as a tight unit; the plan was to take position in a watch tower, using it to provide cover as a two-man team worked through the camp stealthily, it took just seconds to adjust our loadouts to silencers and sniper rifles and not much longer to gain the advantage we so desperately craved. The crack and eventual whip of a well-aimed rifle bolt could be heard echoing through the encampment as we moved forward; enemies were dropping slowly, purposefully. Ghosts 2 and 3 moved with silent authority, tagging approaching groups of enemies from the cover of foliage and executing them dutifully in tandem while peering down the iron sights, a visual cue indicating the other was weapons ready and in a position to fire.

Snaking through the complex, detection and a battle for which we were not equipped to win, was avoided. But then we heard it. The booming, deafening explosion of a rocket-propelled grenade striking the rotor of an enemy helicopter – Ghost 4 re-emerged and within seconds everything went to hell. Like every mission we've participated in thus far in Bolivia, encounters may start stealthily but they always seem to end in a shoot-out.

Even the best laid plans can unravel through just a second of spontaneity. Readjusting to the rhythm of combat is easy enough, »



> We give you the objective, we give you all the toys in this sandbox, and then you play how you want
>
> **Sam Strachman, narrative director**

but it's here where any tactical ambitions are quickly replaced with hectic shoot-outs, more *Call Of Duty* than *Tom Clancy*. Then again, that's just the risk you run fighting alongside soldiers you don't know – not that going solo would likely have gone any more successfully.

CASTLES IN THE SAND

From a legacy perspective, taking *Ghost Recon* into an open-world environment actually makes a lot of sense. The franchise's debut earned itself a faithful audience back in 2001 by mixing tactical military action with large open environments, all of it wrapped around a wickedly high difficulty level. What makes less sense is Ubisoft Paris' devotion to building a seamless transition between single-player and co-operative sessions – in effect you lose the difficulty, while the tactical military action is only possible if you go out of your way to build that experience for yourself and enforce it on others around you. It creates a dichotomy between experience and execution, and you can hear the genesis of it in the way the team speaks about the game.

"We wanted to take *Ghost Recon* to a new level. If you remember the very first *Ghost Recon*, getting this franchise into an open world was quite an obvious choice," says creative director Eric Couzian. "But it was not just another open world that we wanted, we also wanted to give total freedom of choice. What I mean by total freedom of choice is that you can play the way you want, depending on your own play style."

There are two ideas here, and they aren't playing nicely. Effectively, with such little reliance on narrative, set-pieces and scripted events to drive play forward, Ubisoft is hoping that players will get lost in the fun of the sandbox it has created. The idea of "total freedom of choice" essentially equates to 'undirected play'; in this wild sandbox Ubisoft has created, the experience is supposed to be pure, *freeing*. Players should find fun in the fact that things like narration, map progression or item procurement no longer inhibit the action.

It's true that Ubisoft Paris has built an incredibly tight, solid shooter – one that allows for seamless switching between third- and first-person combat. It has a deep and customisable engine built for reactive play and a technically impressive drop-in/drop-out co-op system, built inside a systemic and responsive open world. But it still feels as if it is missing a critical element of play. What the studio has seemingly failed to do is put as much innovation and depth into the mission design, narrative structure and writing, as they have into their basic mechanics.

Just because a player has stepped into a sandbox doesn't necessarily mean that they are going to build castles within it. The idea of leveraging player imagination is ambitious in and of itself, but it is also risky. Strachman is eager to assert that by "creating all of the tools and all of the toys" the player should have enough to get the intended experience out of *Wildlands*. If you're with a good group for co-op, the potential for this system does come to the fore and the anecdotal stories created throughout play can be fun, as too is the retelling of them.

"Here are all the toys, now go play; for us that's a really important design principle," he says. "Do you want to load up a helicopter with C4 and throw it into the middle of a camp, blowing everything up? Or do you want to wait until its raining or night time to sneak in through the side... when I'm playing with my friends I like to do crazy shit and I like to see crazy shit happening. That freedom and that openness is what provides that."



LIVING, BREATHING WORLD

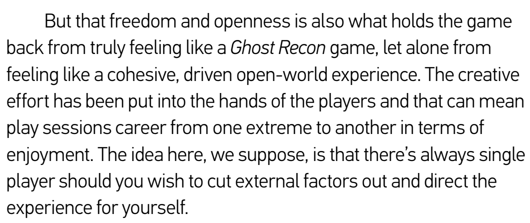
UBISOFT DISCUSSES CREATING A VIBRANT ECOSYSTEM

"It's kind of cool," says narrative director Sam Strachman on watching the game evolve. "As we started developing the game we started with something that's really empty and really open, but then you start to see something that [resembles] this living and breathing simulation."

And he isn't wrong, either. *Wildlands* isn't just Ubisoft's biggest open world, but its most vibrant and lifelike. The team at Ubisoft Paris has put a great amount of time into ensuring the world around you feels like a real place. This process was kick-started by 30 developers embedding themselves in Bolivia to study the environment, meet the locals and generally build a picture of life in the area. After that, it's the tricky process of turning that reality into digital systems.

"We have an AI system where [civilians] are getting up and going to work. They are going for lunch and then coming home and going to sleep, and you have all the AI working off their individual agendas," notes Strachman. "Once the weather system, the day/night cycle and the AI systems are all running together it starts coming alive… the world keeps on living around you."





But that freedom and openness is also what holds the game back from truly feeling like a *Ghost Recon* game, let alone from feeling like a cohesive, driven open-world experience. The creative effort has been put into the hands of the players and that can mean play sessions career from one extreme to another in terms of enjoyment. The idea here, we suppose, is that there's always single player should you wish to cut external factors out and direct the experience for yourself.

"We wanted a game where from the beginning to the end there isn't a single thing that you can or can't do in one mode or the other – it was really important to balance the two," says Strachman. "They are both equally fun and equally have their own unique aspects to them, but you are not ever missing any content."

No content is missing, that is true, but *Wildlands* isn't as flexible in solo as it is in co-op. Ultimately, you are restricted by the AI teammates that follow you. The ability to change and adapt to missions is held back by a rudimentary command wheel system. The pacing and flexibility feels limited too in single player, building an experience that feels like less than the sum of its many shifting parts. Ultimately, *Wildlands* is a technically impressive and innovative concept – there are great moments to be had so long as you have the right personnel by your side – but whether there's enough here to hold attention throughout the many hours of play ahead remains to be seen.

GOING SOLO

Following a suite of co-operative fiascos we've decided to go solo, the three AI-controlled Ghosts are by our side as standard. We've shifted to the safer region of Itacua in an attempt to draw Yuri and Polito – a loving couple and the cartel's resident doctors of death – out of hiding by ruining their operations and stealing their expensive toys. The first to go is the sports car.

After a series of short infiltration missions we've zeroed in on its location. Under the cover of darkness, we planned on using stealth to sneak through and silently dispatch the guards situated around a small encampment. Sadly, the AI had other ideas. While they can be directed via a tactical wheel, the commands lack any of the depth or flexibility seen in the older *Conflict* games (let alone the *Ghost Recons*). You can't send specific soldiers to specific locations on the map, meaning you immediately lose the breadth of tactical opportunity and freedom supposedly available to you at all times. Numerous enemies can be tagged for simultaneous takedown – and you can switch between open/hold fire tac-options – but it lacks the satisfying end result that you'd expect to find in a *Tom Clancy* game. Your AI companions run into open spaces, they struggle to duck into cover and, should they become too separated from your position, they will simply magically teleport to your side.

And so a large firefight erupts through no fault of our own. The AI stumbles through the battle as we trade shots with enemies rushing our position; we push towards the car and take shelter in its plush interior. "This car is swanky," our character gruffly declares, "and there is a bloody condom in the glove box… make that two bloody condoms."

"I guess that confirms it is Yuri and Politos, right?" One of the other Ghosts laughs, as we return fire in one of the most ridiculous conversations we've ever heard in a Ubisoft game. "Even if the condoms do come as standard, it's still a sweet fucking car!"

At this point, all we can do is put the controller down and put our head in our hands.




RIME

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

"When you are responsible for other people – for the wellbeing of their families – sometimes you can get a lot of vertigo. But the sooner you get used to the feeling of always falling the better, because in life you often find yourself falling forever."

Tequila Works' CEO Raúl Rubio knows that the development of *Rime* is like no other. For the better part of four years, his studio has been home to one of the most anticipated independent adventure games of recent memory. But for the longest time it has also existed only on the periphery, as a project that found itself plunged into darkness as quickly as it was pushed into the light.

For many years there have been plenty more questions than there were answers for us to give, though Tequila Works has finally opened up the doors to its mysterious, mesmerising island, inviting **games™** to Madrid to play *Rime* for ourselves – persistence pays off in the end, don't let anybody tell you otherwise. That, clearly, was a daunting prospect for the studio, particularly for one so devilishly committed to seeing this particular passion project through to the end.

AFTER YEARS IN THE SHADOWS, RIME FINALLY REVEALS ITS TRUE NATURE

"As an independent developer, there are many things that leave you sleepless at night," admits Rubio, who also serves as creative director of *Rime*. For Tequila Works, surviving on the success of only one title for four years – *Deadlight*, marking the studio's debut in 2012 – could well have been one of them. It's easy to understand why many of those years may have felt like a lifetime for the team, a small staff that has fluctuated between 15 and 30 throughout development. It's enough to keep anybody awake at night. But *Rime* is special, worth fighting for. Much like the mystery that surrounds its protracted development, *Rime* is, by its very nature, dreamlike.

"I'm pretty sure that if mankind one day discovered time travel it will be because of game designers," laughs Rubio. "You know, there are many things we could [have] done differently, but we cannot go back in time… there were so many times that we were tempted to do something different [but], in the end, I'm really happy that we stayed true to our vision."

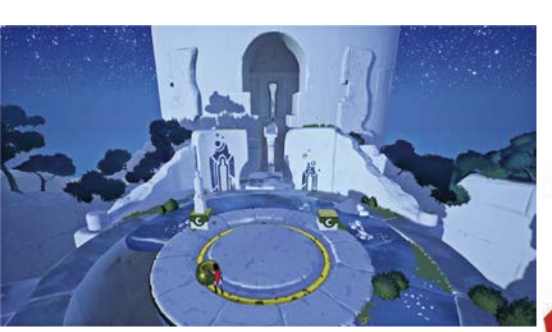
At its simplest, that vision is thus: there is always an island, there is always a tower and there is always a boy; what occurs after these three elements converge is for you to discover, to parse and unpack, taking as »

much or as little from the experience as you desire. *Rime* has undergone a huge transformation in the last two years, the period in which it disappeared from the spotlight – prompting fears it had been cancelled before the studio was able to reacquire the IP rights from Sony and earn its multiplatform freedom – though much of this is understated. Tequila Works has delivered on its vision, even if that path wasn't always clear.

"It's like I want to climb to the top of the Everest but I do not know which route I want to follow. Sometimes you feel like you are not going to make it at all, but then the next day it's like 'oh yeah, we got it!' and then you can finally move forward," he says, later adding, "if we could go back in time we would probably release this game in 2015 instead of 2017. But, yeah, that's a different story."

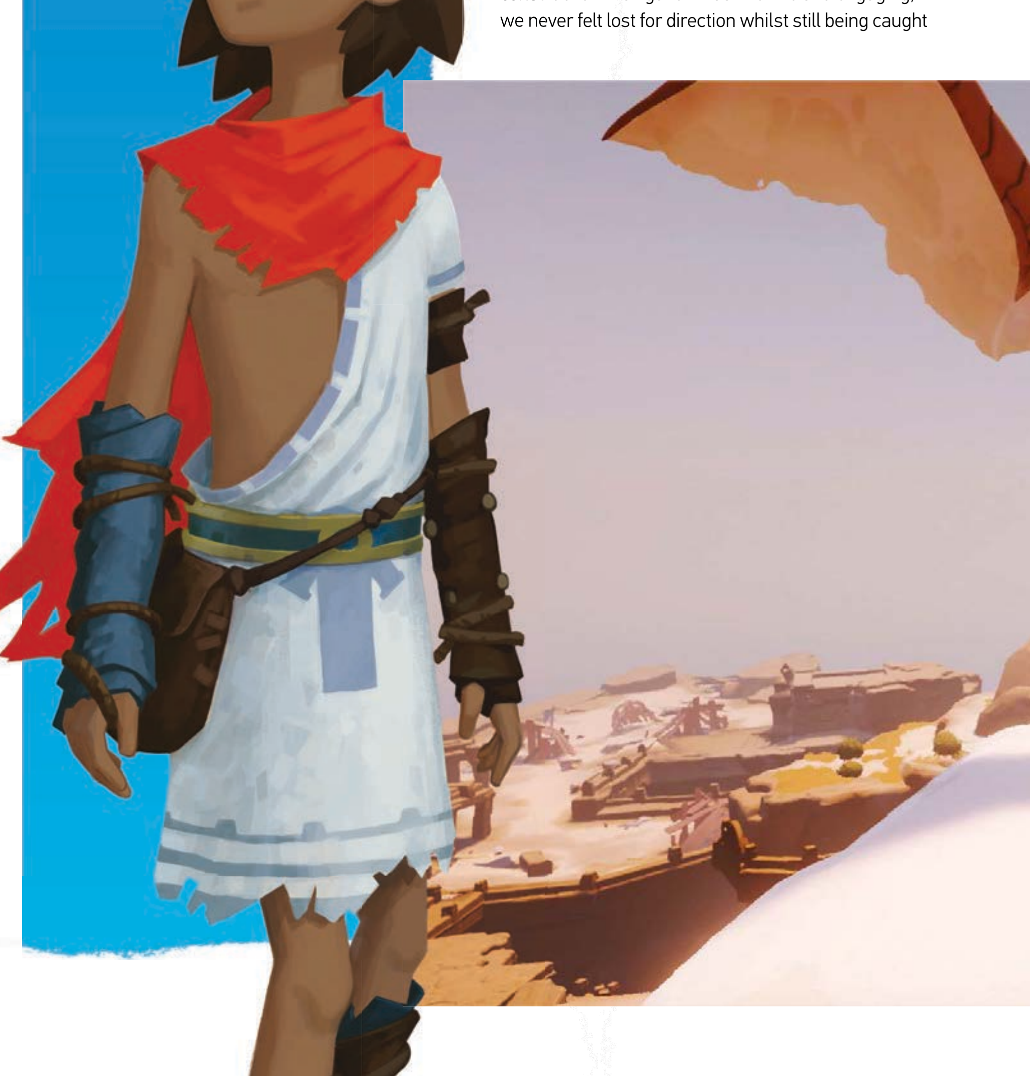
He laughs this comment off, but what if that *is* the story? *Rime* has followed an unconventional development path because it is an inherently unconventional game. A uniquely spirited adventure, *Rime* has been purposefully designed to evoke an emotional response from the player, authentic in its ambition to tell a personal story – though what that may be will differ from player to player. So, where has *Rime* been since its debut as a PlayStation 4 exclusive at Gamescom way back in 2013? Tequila Works has been building it up and tearing it back down, and the result of that process – and how it got there – is really quite fascinating.

Following a mesmerising reveal, *Rime* drew immediate attention. With little information to go on, it was quickly assumed that *Rime* would bring together the intimate, emotive storytelling of *Ico* with the charming, spectacle of *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker*. As it should happen, aside from the gorgeous sun-soaked cel-shaded visuals, those comparisons were well meaning but entirely misplaced. It has more in common with the likes of *Journey* and *The Witness*, but even that doesn't quite give you the whole picture.





> There is a thin line between creating a compelling and challenging experience, and making it frustrating. Frustration was something that we wanted to avoid in Rime



When Rubio describes *Rime* as 'risky', well, he isn't wrong. From the moment you first drift ashore on the island, what you see is what you get. There are no HUD, tutorials or objective markers to be found, instead players are guided through to points of interest by smart visual navigation tools; the circling of birds in a Dreamcast-blue sky, the discolouration of grass to denote exploration opportunities or the distant motions of a character shrouded in a vivid red cloak to get you back on track. This, the visual language, was something Tequila spent "literally years working on" as, despite looking beautiful, there were frustrations within its early design.

"The game looked beautiful but people got frustrated for two reasons: Firstly, people love exploring but there was nothing for them to find, and secondly, they were exploring and they forgot what they were doing and where they came from. Just solving that took years. It's been something we gave a lot of attention to. This is a game with no dialogue, no HUD… so doing that has been hard"

The nameless protagonist does not speak, but they can shout at the press of a button – the warble of the small child activating mysterious runes and objects scattered around the island, the backbone to many of the puzzles. A narrative runs silently through it all, told through broad, beautiful musical keystrokes and subtle environmental storytelling cues. *Rime* is often beautiful and affecting, we spent much of our time with it caught in silent appreciation – in awe at its masterful construction. Navigation was intuitive and engaging, we never felt lost for direction whilst still being caught



Rime is no longer a PlayStation 4 exclusive. Tequila Works re-acquired the IP rights from Sony, ensuring the game could come out on Xbox One, Switch and PS4 this May.

up in the wider adventure. The challenge here, of course, will be maintaining that feeling throughout the entire adventure.

Rubio notes that to achieve this feeling, *Rime* has undergone careful (sometimes sweeping) iteration, a process that could have only occurred in the time Tequila Works has given itself to breathe. The game that existed all those years ago, while thematically and visually identical, seems to have warped and evolved into something greater. "Even if it sounds weird, the last two years have actually been removing stuff from the game," Rubio chuckles. "Streamlining it to make it more elegant and minimalist."

"We like to joke around and say that making games is hard, but the reality is that making games *is* hard. These last two years have been polishing and sometimes fixing things that we didn't believe was true to the vision. For starters, I think we had far more puzzles two years ago. But *Rime* was supposed to be an exploration adventure; we wanted the player to discover what was beyond the surface. But two years ago it was more like: get into the room, have a puzzle, get into another room, another puzzle. All the game was like that but it was not what we wanted… now we are very close to what we originally wanted to do with the game in the first place."

The result is puzzles that are carefully woven into broader areas of the world. *Rime*'s island has a day/night cycle, which can later be manipulated at towering shrines; the puzzles play with perspective, the use of shadows, the focus of light and sound, with many of these elements shifting with the setting of the sun.

"There is a thin line between creating a compelling and challenging experience, and making it frustrating. Frustration was something that we wanted to avoid in *Rime*, that's the reason that you cannot die in the game," says Rubio, noting a design philosophy that has carried far past *Rime*'s puzzle design, affecting everything from the size of the island to even the animation of the child's movements. "We had pretty complex puzzles, but now they are on a curve," he continues, noting that – while he was forbidden from playing *The Witness* during development by other staff – he can now see how comparisons would have been drawn by the community.

The puzzles that now exist in *Rime* are simple but satisfying, at least through the opening hours, designed to impede progress and immerse you in your surroundings. Later the challenge will increase through the introduction of dangerous predators, large enough in size to break puzzles and crush you. But underneath all of this – outside of the obvious puzzles – a more difficult challenge presented itself. "I must be a sociopath or something, because I love hiding small hints and details in there for people to discover," says Rubio, as we lamented the discovery of certain objects within particular spaces with seemingly nowhere to place them. For those that want to get everything out of *Rime*, intuitive exploration will be a must.

"Paying attention to the little details is essential to understanding it. You can play it and don't pay attention to the story if you want, but you get these glimpses into something deeper. You aren't supposed to be there in the first place; you are always, as a player, assuming that you are the ones trespassing these forbidden, unseen civilisations. That you are normal and they are the weird ones, right? But they are as puzzled as you by your presence and that's the beginning of something."

The "they" he refers to we wouldn't like to spoil, but Rubio is quick to suggest that everything isn't as it seems on the island, sweeping between beautiful Mediterranean vistas, deep bleak labyrinths and barren desert planes. "The world is reacting to your presence… you just wait, you'll see how weird the game gets."

Tequila Works is quick to talk about its 'vision' for *Rime*. Pressing a little deeper, everybody we spoke with at the studio was happy to reflect on how personal the project has been for them as individuals. It's natural to assume that this is in reference to the time and »

SAVED BY STEAM

HOW AN INDIE STUDIO IS ABLE TO SURVIVE FOR FOUR YEARS WITHOUT A RELEASE

Tequila Works isn't like many other independent studios, it has been able to exist off of the back of just one title. Four years is a lifetime in this industry, though the studio credits Steam largely with its survival.

"I can tell you that it was the combination of *Deadlight* and Steam," says Tequila Works' CEO Raúl Rubio. "Steam saved our ass. We [had] a very tough year from the release of *Deadlight* until we could finally start *Rime*. The first year of *Rime* we fully financed ourselves. If it weren't for the money we got through *Deadlight* and Steam we would be dead, for sure. The logical step would have been to do a sequel, but we always knew that unless we had something really interesting to tell or experience then what was the point of making a sequel?"

***Deadlight* sold over 2 million copies and that, it seems, was enough to keep the dream alive. That has allowed Tequila Works to grow into a position where it can – not only build, refine and finish *Rime* – but delve into other projects such as *The Sexy Brutale* (a murder mystery made in collaboration with Cavalier Game Studios) and two other unannounced projects that are pushing the boundaries of modern technology.**



Rime is, at its heart, an exploration and puzzle game. It features no combat, with players having to use the environment and their wits to escape predators and the mysteries of the island.

tears poured into development, but they are in fact speaking to something much deeper that simmers beneath the surface.

"When we started *Rime* we wanted to do something that had a simple story that anybody could understand, but it has a deeper layer that is very personal. We are doing something that is finding what you have inside your self – in your heart – and projecting it outside, that's why it is so personal... we have literally put personal things, stories and memories in there."

"There's a part towards the end of the first chapter," recalls Rubio when we press for an example, "where you enter a tower and you find this labyrinth that is in darkness and you use light to guide yourself through. That is inspired by a personal experience that I lived when I was a child, when I got lost in a cave; I had to use the flash from a camera to get out."

It's easy to see examples of this scattered all throughout the game. It adds new context to the smallest pieces of detail, to the design of particular puzzles and sombre swells of the audio in certain moments. In one secret area we happened across, the boy's powerful shout was suddenly changed to a whimper; we had stumbled across a room adorned with red roses that led towards a grave. It's an upsetting, powerful discovery when armed with the knowledge of its design and purpose, although it's left purposefully oblique in order for us to be able to draw our own conclusions.

"That's the beauty of *Rime*, we don't have a narrator telling you everything; it's something that you have to figure out for yourself. You can find your own interpretation and it doesn't need to define your experience and that's okay," says Rubio. "When you play the game from beginning to end, one thing we noticed is that each person comes away with a different understanding of the ending. That was never intended," he says, laughing, "but I'm really glad we achieved that."

This is an extremely personal project for Tequila Works, with each of the staff pouring personal experiences and stories into the game, which manifest in everything from the design to the music.



When we started Rime we wanted to do something that had a simple story that anybody could understand, but it has a deeper layer that is very personal

Rime is an understated adventure. It is quiet and sombre, with those feelings offset by excitement and thrills as you begin to solve puzzles and pull back the layers of mystery. The gameplay itself is simple, but ultimately effective. *Rime* knows exactly what it wants to do and achieves it in style. It's a testament to Tequila Works' unwavering creative vision. At times, that vision led the studio down some dangerous paths but it is, as Rubio said earlier, akin to wanting to climb Everest but not knowing which route to follow.

"With *Rime* we knew we wanted to create an emotional response from the player but the thing is, how? How we were going to do that was not clear and we had to experiment a lot. We did hundreds of prototypes, and countless experiments on what kind of gameplay we wanted," admits Rubio. "Certain areas we have redone eight or ten times, huge areas of the world, because it didn't work for some reason – it was too difficult, you got lost. Some areas were fully open world but user tests show that people got lost, because literally you have no map in this game. Sometimes reducing is better. It can sound odd for gamers, but sometimes you have to deconstruct and build it again, with fewer pieces."

This is a process Tequila Works is intimately familiar with. You may recall that – during the dark days of lost contact with *Rime* – it was long rumoured that the game could have been a Microsoft exclusive, but the company passed on it, allowing Sony to pick it up. In a parallel world, *Rime* would have been *Gauntlet* meets *Minecraft* meets *Jason And The Argonauts*; a survival sim with light crafting elements and tower-defence combat. This, in fact, was only partly true.

Before *Rime*, there was *Echoes Of Osiris*. Rubio is quick to make a separation between the two projects: "just for clarification, *Osiris* and *Rime* were not the same game. They shared elements but they were different concepts. Literally, that game was about survival and tower defence, while this one is about exploring and not fearing the dangers hiding around the corners of the world. That's why, based on what people have seen so far, it's a very colourful and light world, but the deeper you dig – just like life – the world is not a perfect theme park."

The elements that the two games share – outside of the island and tower – have now all largely been removed. Some sounded like interesting ideas, such »





CHILDLIKE INNOCENCE

Rime may have a beautiful world, intuitive puzzle design and an incredible sense of place, but it also feels fragile. You never feel safe or content, eager to move on for mysteries lurk behind the still statues and distant horizons. That's because of the lead protagonist, an eight-year-old boy that brings the game's separate elements together.

"You're this child – this eight-year-old kid – you cannot feel as if you are the hero who is saving the world. We wanted the kid to feel fragile. You are supposed to be helpless," says Tequila Works' CEO Raúl Rubio, citing this as the reason *Rime* doesn't feature any combat.

One of the biggest achievements here is the way the kid moves and interacts with the world. It feels authentic, reflecting how you remember games such as *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* handled back in the day. The studio notes that it once had a "super fluid" animation system in place, leaning on the floaty but haphazard system seen in *Another World*, but that it ultimately gave way to something that felt more comfortable and responsive to weild.

"We paid a lot of attention to games like *Jak & Daxter* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, because we wanted to show that clunkiness. You are supposed to be an eight-year-old kid. But as we kept moving through development, there was a conflict. It was beautiful to look at – we had these super fluid animations, but we are not Naughty Dog. In order to achieve a fluid and immediate response in the animations you need a lot of short blends in the animation – very short animations that blend in any situation [so you can move smoothly between running and jumping and turning, etc]. It looked nice but it was frustrating."

"The result is maybe it isn't as beautiful now as it was, but the beauty that you lose is something you gain in terms of control response. I think that's something that players value far more. We have kept the feeling of being a child, but the animators are maybe not as happy because the animations are not as good as they wanted, but I don't think anybody is going to get mad playing *Rime* now because of this."

The original working title for *Rime* was Siren, but it was already taken and so Tequila went back to the drawing board. It settled on *Rime*, drawing on the works of 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. It isn't clear whether they meant the 18th century poem or the Iron Maiden song.

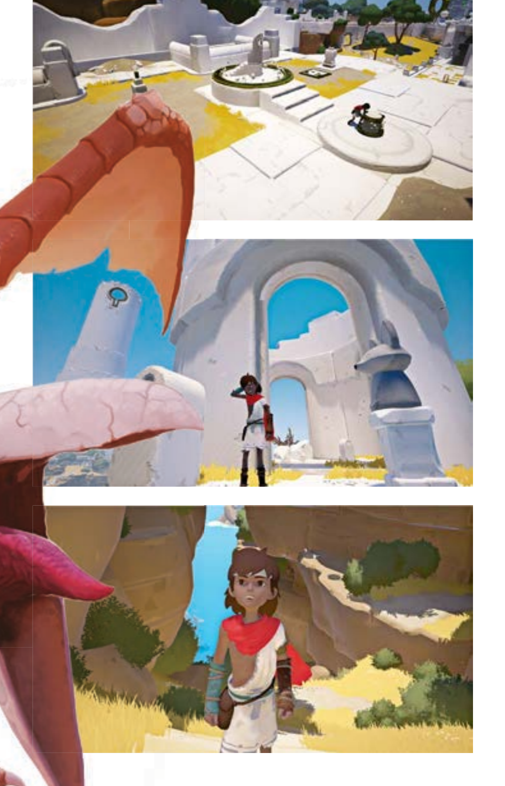
Rime feels standalone to anything else out there in the indie scene, though it best recalls fond memories of playing *Journey* for the first time.

> Steam saved our ass. It was the combination of Deadlight and Steam

as a "super complex spoken system, where you could talk and you could scream." While this action is now contextual, back in its PS4-exclusivity days, *Rime* was to make full use of the imminently arriving PS4's features. "Back in the day, you could even modulate your voice with the touch pad [on a PS4 controller] and create songs; that was fun, but it was super complex and really hard to master. We wanted something that was far simpler… and so [we] experimented"

We heard plenty of stories like this while we were with the team, and you can see it ricocheting all throughout the design. Some were as simple as sticks being removed from the island, Rubio tells us, because "if we started adding items that can be used as weapons well the next step is giving you a sword. You are supposed to be helpless… it was interesting but it added a lot of complexity [and] that didn't really benefit





the game." While other elements from the *Osiris* vision were simply cut away as Tequila found its feet with *Rime* as a project. "[As] for the survival elements; yeah okay, you are stranded on an island and one designer would say that one of the mechanics is that you need to eat and find water to survive. Well first, *Don't Starve* was released and we said that we not going to do something as good as this, at all!" Rubio once again laughs, adding, "and second, this is distracting us from the kind of experience that we want to have in the first place, so lets remove it."

All of this, from the outside looking in, sounds pretty chaotic. But the reality of the situation is that *Rime* needed the extra development time, away from the spotlight, to really find its purpose and discover its soul. After walking away we were desperate to dig further into its world, and to uncover its hidden mysteries. There's a playful innocence to it we have rarely seen achieved with such poignancy and clarity. In May, the years of waiting will come to an end. PS4, Switch and Xbox One players will all be able to take part in this adventure, and – if our time with the game is any indication – each one of them will walk away with a different impression. After almost four years of waiting, Tequila Works' mesmerising adventure game will finally be yours to enjoy, a fact that clearly delights the studio.

"We are [finally] free to talk, to tell people what we have being doing all of these years. That's probably been the hardest part. Not because we have had to keep secrets, that isn't a big deal, but as an artist you want always to share your creations; working in this creative environment that's the object of what we want to do."

"Now we are finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel," Rubio says with a sigh of relief. "This was a project that we all wanted to do, this was very personal for the studio and being able to be there for all of the journey has been quite an adventure."

Alternative Software Presents

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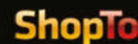
















IMPROVING THE INDUSTRY

12 SMALL (BUT VITAL) CHANGES THAT COULD HELP PROPEL GAMING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

There are some elements of the videogame industry that need to die. They need to die so that they can be reborn. The games are getting bigger and more ambitious than ever before, but still the same old problems – inconsistencies that have been allowed to become commonplace – continue to dwarf our enjoyment and our immersion. In 2017, as gaming continues to grow into one of the most powerful forms of entertainment on the planet, something has to change.

TIRESOME LOADING SCREENS

Why is that we – living in the year 2017 – are still having to contend with lengthy, laborious loading screens? To an extent, this complaint directly reflects the impatience of modern society but, then again, we aren't exactly booting these games up on a ZX Spectrum. Considering the power of our consoles and the creativity of the creators, why are we still staring blankly at (and likely ignoring) tiresome tips and lore that couldn't work its way naturally into the narrative? So much care goes into game creation, it's time for some of that love to work its way to their most boring, necessary component.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V
For 15 years we've put up with it, the long wait to run riot through one of Rockstar's open worlds. It's about time we could play right away, don't you think?



FALLOUT 4
Bethesda-developed games are notoriously buggy. While that can be overlooked, you'd at least think the studio would get loading times down.



DISHONORED 2
It's all well and good giving us the capacity to quick save and quick load, but until we get instant restarts (*Geometry Wars* style) we simply won't be content.

THE SOLUTION?

While the likes of *Mass Effect* and *Metroid* have done their best to hide lengthy load times behind a bunch of monotonous elevator rides, there is something with a far greater potential on the horizon. For the last 20 years, Bandai Namco has had a patent on the concept and execution of the loading-screen minigame but, as that patent for the feature finally expired in 2015, we may well see the demise of the static screen and the introduction of something far more entertaining in the coming years as developers begin work on the next iteration of the humble loading screen. That could be very interesting.

ENDLESS GAME UPDATES

There's a common misconception in the wider gaming community that developers no longer care about QA. While we know that, generally, this isn't the case (much time, love and devotion goes in to every game; yes, even the bad ones) it is starting to feel like corners are being cut. Developers used to work to a finite deadline – 'going Gold' meant the game was shipped and that was that, bugs and all. While we aren't bemoaning developers that wish to improve the launch experience right up to the wire, something has to be done about patches, particularly those of a day one variety. The waiting, oh, the *waiting*; this madness must end.



ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY
It is broken, messy releases like *Assassin's Creed: Unity* that day one patches were built for, though Ubisoft ultimately paid the price on that one.



DESTINY
Oh, so you want to come back to *Destiny* do you? Wait, you meant you wanted to wait 14-hours for it to install the patches, right? Of course you did.

FINAL FANTASY XV
Square Enix shipped *FFXV* knowing changes were needed to overhaul Chapter 13 and fill in story blanks through monthly post-release patches.

THE SOLUTION?



As games become more intricate and complicated to design, so too is the QA process. But it's become clear that more time needs to be dedicated to bug fixing and optimisation ahead of launch. When game patches arriving the size of *Half-Life 2* has been normalised you know that there's a problem, and it's one developers will need to be more transparent about in the future.

LOSING CONTROL

It's fair to say that modern videogames are built around a culture of trolling and griefing, in fact, many games actively do encourage this kind of behaviour. However, a problem arises when developers don't put any systems in place to stop it from happening or from going too far, giving those with an inherently disruptive personality a space to ruin an experience for others that are around them. Trusting players to play the game as it was originally intended, not to go off script and cause chaos, is a largely redundant practice now. The sooner that we all accept that a small, irritating minority are more interested in trolling than competing online, the sooner that game developers can work to exorcise it entirely.



THE SOLUTION?

A greater emphasis needs to be placed on appropriately protecting players, alongside the core-gameplay experience itself. Open multiplayer lobbies are largely silent, the sense of community that helped propel Xbox Live and PSN to success seems to have just faded away, and developers need to get smart about the ways in which it combats disruptive behaviour.



MINECRAFT
Mojang has always leaned on community moderation, but that has left griefing to mutate largely unchecked, with builders often facing their works destroyed by troublesome players.



HALO 5: GUARDIANS
Halo players will be familiar with the banhammer – the mystical, all-seeing hammer of justice against online jerks. More publishers could learn a thing or two from Bungie and 343 Industries.



DAYZ
If you're going to encourage trolling, at least build it into the framework of the experience. DayZ actively encourages griefing, but it does so in a way that feels natural.

DELAYED GRATIFICATION

It's a sad truth that, despite having the most powerful home consoles within our reach, games are still ultimately limited by the technology available. At least Microsoft is upfront about its own limitations, claiming its "optical disc drives can't read data quickly enough to keep up with modern games" on an official support page. That means the days of just inserting a disk into your console and being able to play it immediately are over – a maximum data transfer rates of just 54Mbps is largely to blame. New technology is supposed to make life easier and more convenient, but the current generation of consoles is struggling to find the courage to make a necessary leap into the future.



DESTINY: THE TAKEN KING
Patches and updates weren't the only thing waiting for us at launch. Lengthy disk install times ensure that you're sat waiting while your friends are off adventuring.



FIFA 17
EA has the right idea, letting you play a limited build of the game whilst waiting for installation. But it's still a slog, especially as team choice is ultimately restricted.



RESIDENT EVIL VII
You've been waiting a decade for a good *Resident Evil* game? You can wait another few hours then, time well spent lamenting the lack of a cheesy game manual.

THE SOLUTION?

Don Mattrick warned us, and we refused to listen. Physical media is proving to be a blight on modern gaming, where the transferral of assets and critical data to the console's HDD is proving to be more of a hindrance than a revelation. Powerful new hardware, such as Project Scorpio and the PS4 Pro, needs to reduce install times, else we should usher in the age of digital-only gaming.

GROWING PAINS

Okay, it's finally over. You hear us? It is done. With the release of *Gears Of War 4*, the age of the 'manly man' has finally come to an end – the torch of annoying protagonistic duties passed to jovial students born from the Nathan Drake school of machismo comedy. Considering how authentic voice and motion capture is now, there is little reason for a character to be defined only by how low on the baritone scale they can register a gruff. And yet many developers seem afraid to let this embarrassing trope die; videogames can offer powerful emotional resonance, but its lackluster characters are holding them back.



GEARS OF WAR
It's all fist-bumps and man hugs, which means that it hasn't aged well at all. *Gears* was of its time, but it's also time to bring some character to war.



DUKE NUKEM FOREVER
Duke Nukem has become an embarrassment to himself and all of us. He's that misogynistic uncle that you thank the lord you only have to see around the holidays.



MADDEN NFL 17
While the game itself isn't too bad, EA's messaging is. Gamers have grown up, it's time that the way that games are marketed towards them does too.

THE SOLUTION?

Manufacturers will always serve their core demographic, but there has been a noticeable shift in the way many large publishers have set about making and marketing their games – diversifying the image of their biggest properties to better appeal to a wider cross-section of people. Change is happening, it just needs to happen a little faster.



OPEN ENDED TO A FAULT

Open-world games used to represent the future of our medium; the last generation brought about true, emergent and reactive open spaces the likes of which we had never experienced before, they were fresh and exciting. Now they seem bloated and purposeless, and the push to bring everything into open worlds is beginning to have an effect on game quality. While worlds continue to evolve, the creativity and content within them has stifled, leaving productions feeling small and impersonal. It's time developers and publishers learned a valuable lesson: huge open worlds no longer impress, it's the game within that will ultimately stand the test of time.



MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST
After years of waiting for a sequel, *Catalyst* was an abject failure. The concept failed in an open-world environment, and so this sequel was dead on arrival.



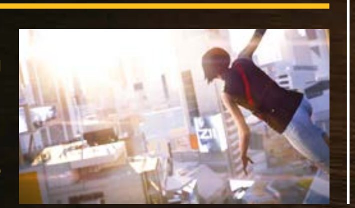
GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS
Ubisoft's largest open world and, without question, its emptiest; *Wildlands* is proof that a sandbox is only as good as the toys you find inside of it.



THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT
The exception to the rule, *The Witcher 3* goes to show that open worlds can evolve an experience if enough care and heart is put in to the execution of its design.

THE SOLUTION?

Developers such as Naughty Dog, Remedy Entertainment and id Software are demonstrating such a high level of expertise and execution within their linear games that simply can't exist in open worlds – at least, not by the standard to which they are created today. For the better of the industry, game design needs to be scaled back.



UNLOCK THE PAST

If the Xbox One has proven anything, it's that backwards compatibility is no longer the hurdle it once was. As the leading manufacturers continue to evolve and iterate on their online systems, there is very little reason we shouldn't have access to our libraries of previously purchased digital games. Nintendo is seemingly the worst for it, putting its most loyal fans in the position of having to repurchase NES, SNES and Game Boy classics time and time again as a new console arrives – although Sony isn't much better with its paywalled PlayStation Now service. There is no reason for generation-locked digital content in 2017, it's time publishers did something about it.



PLAYSTATION NOW
The subscription service lets players repurchase PS3 titles and an assortment of classics, but it seems trivial when put against Microsoft's (free) service on Xbox One.



SUPER MARIO BROS.
How many times have you purchased *Super Mario Bros.*? The classic has been made available on nearly every Nintendo system, we shouldn't need to buy it again and again.



XBOX ONE BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY
With hundreds of titles from the Xbox 360 era available, and a steady stream coming free monthly for Gold users, backwards compatibility on Xbox One is a guiding light.

THE SOLUTION?

Microsoft created an Xbox 360 emulator within the Xbox One and that has essentially allowed it to solve the backwards compatibility crisis. While Sony may struggle to implement something similar now, there is little reason why Nintendo couldn't begin to honour its most loyal followers and give them access to classics they have already tied to their accounts across the 3DS and Wii era.

MICROTRANSACTIONS

We made a mistake. All of us. We accepted microtransactions into the triple-A gaming space, we normalised their application in the highest tier of the industry and now they are likely here to stay. Do you remember the good ol' days? Where you'd be rewarded with items, weapons and decals by simply *playing* the game? Microtransactions have a time and a place, but in much of triple-A it is not. Too often does it feel vindictive, as if it is holding back the potential of some game modes for fear of upsetting the now-established marketplace – think about it, when was the last time *FIFA*'s Ultimate Team received a notable upgrade or overhaul?



FIFA 17
It's almost impossible to play Ultimate Team without spending money, so enticing has EA made the experience. *FIFA* quickly becomes a scourge on your bank balance.



HALO 5: GUARDIANS
Halo has never been a game that needed microtransactions, but it has them now! 343 Industries has forced them in to Warzone and it still feels out of place to this day.

THE SOLUTION?

It is getting trickier to spot these days where the game ends and the paywall begins. Many developers have taken to hiding them behind card-based mechanics – popular with YouTubers and unpopular with the general public. Ultimately, after you've purchased a game at full price you shouldn't then have to contend with monetary barriers to better facilitate progression or aggression, especially in multiplayer gaming spaces.

FICTION WITH BOUNDARIES

Every time we begin a videogame, we willingly establish a suspension of disbelief – we sacrifice logic in favour of enjoyment. And that's okay; we aren't, after all, saying that every game needs to be presented (or reliant) on realism, most games are knowingly absurd and that's *fine*. But as narrative and character ambitions continue to develop within enterprising studios, eventually there comes a time when enough is enough. Many games are too eager to shatter their own suspension of disbelief in favour of dated gameplay constructs – the bloated set-pieces and guided instances of peril – to fill a gap in logic or the story. As the industry grows, so too should our standard for storytelling and characterisation.

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER
Hey Lara, how's your frostbite? You had the foresight to forage for food, shelter and weapons, but not a jacket from one of the hundreds of men you murdered?



UNCHARTED 4
Broken hands: Nathan Drake would have perpetually broken hands if he tried any of that climbing in real life. The suspension of disbelief is real.

THE SOLUTION?

As gaming grows up and evolves, so too should the balance between gameplay and story. Traditional storytelling structures and narrative design really need to be respected, as does the role of a writer. Videogames have the potential to be an incredible vehicle for non-linear storytelling, and it is time that we began holding them to a much higher standard; this will only improve if we will it to.

UNNEEDED ONLINE FEATURES

There's a horrible trend in the modern industry where developers wish for everything to be connected, all of the god-damned time. To an extent, this makes sense for a lot of emerging new titles; the likes of *Overwatch* and *The Division* are multiplayer-only experiences: they should be online, while piracy is still a large concern for developers looking to break into the PC market. Games with a single-player component that require an always-on internet connection are – particularly on console – inherently restrictive, putting us at the whims of unpredictable servers and ongoing support from publishers. Forcing people to engage with online systems when they don't want – or shouldn't have – to only serves to drive a rift between consumers and publishers.



FOR HONOR
Despite having a full single-player campaign, you'll need to be connected at all times to play thanks to the way in which Ubisoft is attempting to blur the lines between its two modes.



SUPER MARIO RUN
It still makes little sense why Nintendo would release a smartphone game that's unplayable on the Underground, in the air or in some parts of the country; for shame.



DIABLO III
Blizzard is still feeling this one. *Diablo III* is as much of a single-player game as it is a multiplayer one, and taking so much control from players still follows the publisher to this day.

THE SOLUTION?

Whatever the reason – be it 'a desire to enhance the experience' or a way of combating piracy – single-player games that require an always-on Internet connection need to disappear. They are ultimately restrictive and anti-consumer by their very nature. This is one trend the industry needs to swiftly back away from as it will only hurt its growth and stability in the future.

FORCED TUTORIALS

Videogames are difficult. Well, that is to anybody looking in from the outside, we mean; they are made up of a series of largely dated and established systems and mechanics, many of which can be confusing and exclusive to a new player. Hence the existence of tutorials, as annoying as they may be. You'd like to think that, at this stage, the option to forgo the tutorial would exist, you know, for those of us that have played literally any videogame in the last 20 years. After all of the installing, patching and waiting to play, the last thing that anybody wants is to be forced into a lesson on the basics of jumping, crouching and firing a weapon.



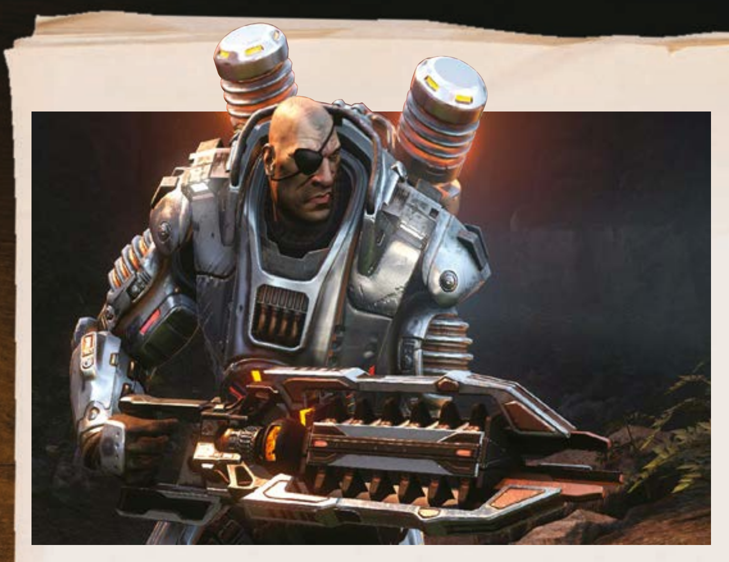
FAR CRY 3: BLOOD DRAGON
Blood Dragon is one of the exceptions to the rule: it has one of the most hilarious tutorial presentations ever, taking the mick out of their obvious failings.



UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
An example of smart tutorial presentation, *Uncharted 4* is so intuitive that it always ensures it teaches you something early before leaning on it later.

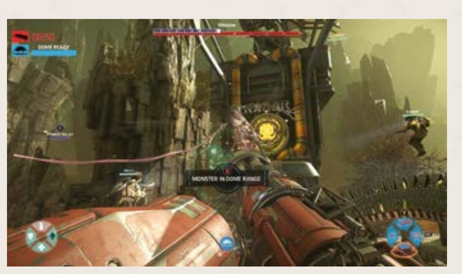
THE SOLUTION?

In effect, the easiest way would be to stop integrating tutorials into the story altogether (we're looking at you Ubisoft) or take the *Blood Dragon* approach and have some real fun with the concept (yes, we're very much still looking at you Ubi). Tutorials are a necessary evil, but there's very little reason that veteran gamers should still be punished with the mundanity of it all.

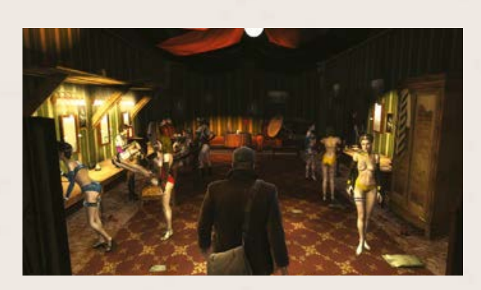


THE USE OF DLC

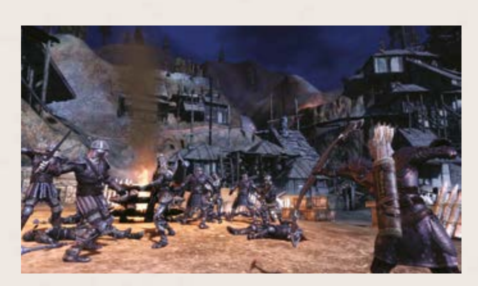
Videogames are expensive. That cost has never been higher, with publishers looking for any way in which they can help offset the cost of development, release and subsequent support of a product in any way possible. DLC has, for the last decade, largely been the answer – much to the dismay of some of the community. While we don't have a problem with DLC in theory, there are still some ways to go when it comes to presenting it to the public; too often can a lack of transparency make it look as if content has been cut from the final product only to be resold or re-packaged as a pre-order bonus later.



EVOLVE
Supported by a maddening amount of day one DLC and post-launch content, *Evolve* seemed to be a step too far for gamers losing patience.



THE SABOTEUR
Oblivion had its Horse Armour and *The Saboteur* had its nudity DLC, asking gamers to pay $3 for the opportunity to see some virtual nipples. Yes, this actually happened.



DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS
Controversial at the time, *Origins* attempted to sell story content from within the game itself, with NPCs advertising additional content and totally destroying the immersion in the process.

THE SOLUTION?

DLC can do wonders for prolonging the lifespan of a game and we'd like to think many publishers will look towards what EA is doing with *Titanfall 2*'s free content roll-out for inspiration, though we understand the pressures of modern development. Ultimately, the timing and content of DLC packages and pre-order bonuses will be met with less scrutiny if an open discord is had with the community, something that we've been desperately in need of for years.

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"Bought the mag for a third time in a row. Love the mix of future, new and old games. Keep up the good work."
Sam Troch via Facebook

Reviews



72

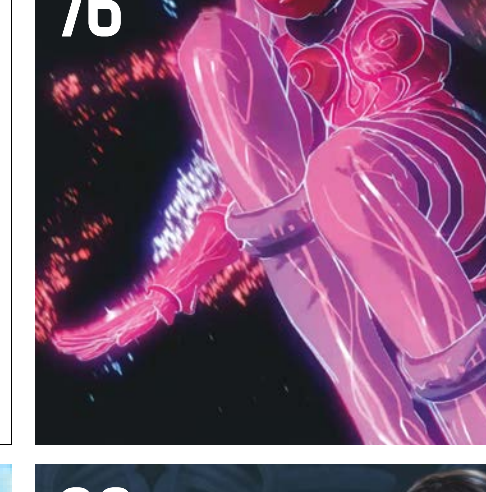
RESIDENT EVIL VII

Capcom has switched perspective, but has it also found a new way of terrifying us?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.


76


78


80


81


82


83

AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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IN MANY RESPECTS, RESIDENT EVIL VII CAN BE CONSIDERED A SUCCESS TO THE SAME EXTENT OF RESIDENT EVIL 4

VR MODE VERDICT

Those playing on PlayStation 4 will find that *Resident Evil VII* features full support for PlayStation VR. It's quite the achievement from a technical perspective. The implementation is user-friendly, smooth and will let you switch effortlessly between 2D or 3D scenarios should it all get a bit much. And, let's be honest, it might get a bit much. Having such a heavily atmospheric, terrifying and jump scare heavy environment pushed up into your face can be mentally exhausting. That said, it's certainly an amazing way to experience the game, giving a greater sense of detail and urgency to events – despite the textures looking a little darker and muddier than the standard method of play.





A MANSION IN THE DARKNESS

Resident Evil VII

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PSVR, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

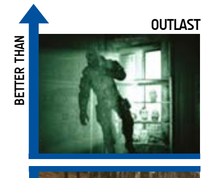
Left: This is the closest to a 'classic' *Resident Evil* experience that Capcom has delivered in a very long time. It's a slow and methodical game that never outstays its welcome – a new lease on life for the survival-horror genre.





BETTER THAN

OUTLAST





AS GOOD AS

RESIDENT EVIL 4

Left: *Resident Evil VII* has been designed as something of a clean slate for the franchise. While there are little links to the wider continuity hidden in pages of lore and paintings around the mansion, you can rest easy if you abandoned the series long ago.

The best scares should leave a scar. A permanent mark that follows you. It should serve to remind you of dangers that lurk in the night, that force you to fear the shadows of your soul and turn from flickering lights that dance in the dark. The best scares should leave a scar, because anything less is but a cheap parlour trick; in this respect, *Resident Evil VII* cuts deep. It brands itself into your very being, playing on the fallacy of your basic instincts and the predictability of your fears. It does this to create an atmosphere of unwavering terror; the kind that stirs you from your sleep, the kind that makes your skin crawl when you're searching for the light, the kind that makes you believe that somebody – or something – is always there. *Resident Evil VII*'s scares leave a scar, and they aren't necessarily physical, although we suppose with PlayStation VR anything is possible.

Resident Evil VII is a technical masterpiece. A true return to the roots of survival-horror, cut from the same cloth as the original *Resident Evil* and the archetypal *Sweet Home*. That isn't to say, however, that *VII*'s ambitions are defined merely by what has come before it, and that's because Capcom has been able to leverage what made its earliest ventures into horror so effective and modernised them, evolving the entire experience to feel fresh and – most integrally – *dangerous*.

Can you recall the last time you felt physically threatened by a videogame? Perhaps it was within *PT*'s oppressive chamber of terror; maybe it was within the combat-less constructs of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Outlast*, or even the haunting shopping centres of *Condemned: Criminal Origins*. While these are all fine examples – games effective at manipulating the emotions of the player – few leave their mark in quite the same way as *Resident Evil VII*.

This perceived sense of danger is born from the simplest shift: *Resident Evil VII* is the first numbered game in the series to be played from a first-person camera perspective. While this has been the source of some amount of controversy, *Resident Evil* has been no stranger to perspective shifts in the past. From the static third-person cameras of decades gone bye, to the over-the-shoulder angles designed to enhance action and emphasise speed in the more recent releases, *Resident Evil* has (to varying degrees of success) always found a way to shift its basic design pillars in service of advancing its various gameplay ambitions.

In many respects, *Resident Evil VII* can be considered a success to the same extent of *Resident Evil 4*, then. It has set a new standard, taking the relatively limited, quieter independent experiences found within *Amnesia* and *Outlast* and given them the triple-A treatment; expanding the claustrophobic corridors of the former out into a sprawling, interconnected gameplay space and expanded expertly on the latter's found-footage theme into a central, dizzying twist on core narrative convention.

The genius of the first-person camera is that it limits the perspective. There's a reason Capcom left the static camera behind at the turn of the century, and that's because it ultimately limited what the studio would be able to achieve in an age of ever-advancing game engines, evolving art principles and design techniques. In practice, the switch to first-person achieves the same effect and purpose of the original camera without immediately dating the experience.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CLASSICAL: *Resident Evil VII* feels unique simply because it has managed to modernise the series' core themes and ideals, and it's done so in style.

It's a different flavour, but it works to build fear and loathing in Dulvey, Louisiana. Turning speed is purposefully slow, working to close down your capabilities and turn up the tension as you methodically stalk through the Baker Estate's many claustrophobic corridors and crawlspaces. In *VII*, so effective is the unwavering, uncomfortable, sense of dread that you are never certain that an enemy hasn't crawled into the room behind you. Never are you 100 per cent certain that a shambling terror isn't about to claw at you from the shadows or begin to stalk you from around a grimly lit corner.

Remember back to the original *Resi*, and how it bred caution by obscuring sections of any given room – ensuring that you were never certain that something horrible wasn't lurking just out of sight – and then consider how *VII* echoes this expertly. Capcom may have gone first person, but it has done so in a way that

ultimately pays respects to its heritage, building a theme of tension all throughout its basic design, and in a way that we thought *Resident Evil* had long left behind.

We mentioned the idea of *Resident Evil VII* closing down your capabilities before, and that's integral to the overall feel and pace of this 12 or so hour game. Despite being set after *Resident Evil 6*, you don't inhabit the body of a former STARS agent, undercover operative or, seemingly, anybody of any note. By putting you into the shoes of everyman Ethan Winters, *Resident Evil* is able to start afresh.

While we could quite easily spend a few more hours trying to work out how tenuously (or perfectly, depending on the quality and content of the upcoming DLC) *VII* ties in to the overall *Resident Evil* timeline, this is (for all intents and purposes) a clean slate. You don't need to have any investment in the 20 years of twisting idiocy that is the *Resident Evil* backstory; there are plenty of fan-service environmental nods, a handful of purposefully (classically) obtuse puzzles, hidden notes and dated references that tie it all together, but the insanity of *Resident Evil*'s continuity, by and large, exists on the periphery.

And yet, still it is able to feel like a quintessential *Resident Evil* experience. Tone and pacing play as much of a part in fostering that feeling as combat and cameras, something *VII* achieves almost effortlessly. Winters is a dry and often sarcastic protagonist, bringing an air of awkward humour to the terrible events unfolding around him in an effort to break some of the tension – a breath of fresh air, as fleeting as it may be. The pace of the gameplay – whether you are creeping to avoid detection from stalking antagonists or pumping screeching creatures full of a dwindling supply of ammunition – is often slow and tense, and there is rarely any escape from the monsters that reside in this mansion in the dark. Running is as good a tactic as any in your desperate attempt to survive.

As pretentious as it may be to claim, the mansion is perhaps the best character in *VII*. The Baker Estate doesn't just feel lived in, but it feels alive. Within its walls you will be made to feel helpless, it will manipulate your actions and your movements, with subtle environmental cues willing you deeper into its depths. It is, in essence, the Spencer Mansion reborn, albeit on a smaller scale. You'll spend much of the game here, exploring the Baker family's residence, becoming intimate with its twisting corridors and web of shortcuts. Enemies, from the Bakers themselves to a limited array of other mutating antagonists, take residence here, alongside an ever-lingering evil that's far scarier than any immediate threat you may encounter.

Outside the mansion's walls, you'll be able to explore the surrounding area – a SAW-inspired torture room, a creepy greenhouse and a decaying house on the edge of the Louisiana Bayou and, later… you know what, we wouldn't dare ruin the surprise. But you'll always return to the house, either by design or intuition. It's full of lore to consume, secret puzzles to uncover hidden deeply in its labyrinth, and only by scouring every corner of the house, will you find the necessary items to keep your backpack stocked and uncover new weapons, items and upgrades.

In true *Resident Evil* style, resources are limited. Your backpack has limited space to store items, saving is limited to infrequent safe rooms. Healing items and ammunition are also limited.

FAQs

Q. IT ISN'T RESIDENT EVIL

That isn't a question, but okay. Listen, despite being in first-person this is the closest to a 'classic' *Resi* experience we've had in a decade.

Q. AREN'T YOU JUST SAYING THAT?

No, seriously, just listen. *Resident Evil VII* uses its new perspective to provide a brand new take on a dated formula.

Q. IS WESKER IN IT?

Look, while you don't need to know the backstory of *Resi* to enjoy this, at least read a wiki. Wesker got thrown into a volcano in *Resi 5*. He's gone, get over it.



Right: Madhouse difficulty is unlocked after you complete the game, changing the location of items and enemies, ramping up the difficulty and forcing you to find hidden cassette taps to save the game.

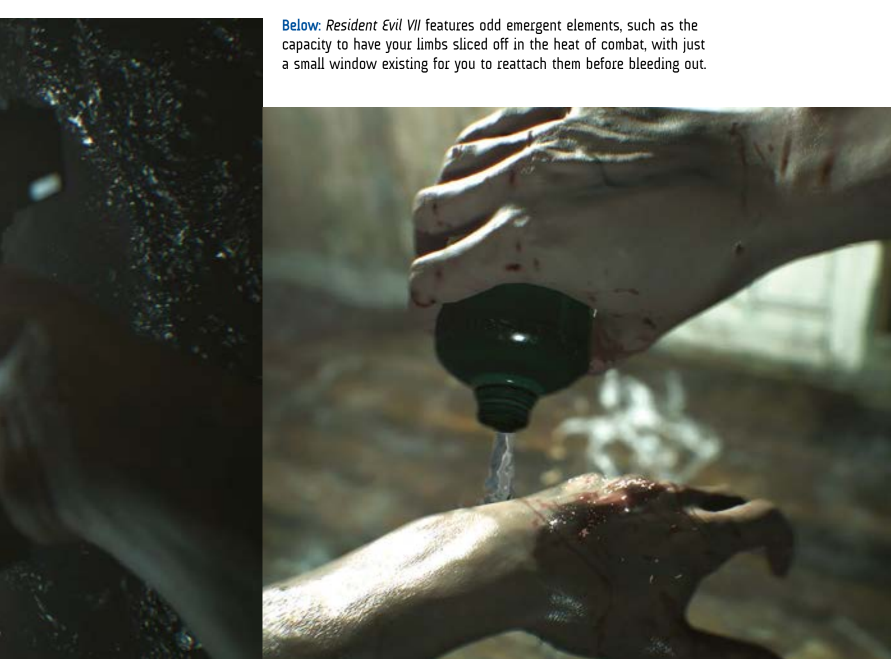




Right: The soundtrack and environmental audio are stunning. Like, actually stunning. They come together to effortlessly build an oppressive atmosphere, with Capcom also keenly aware of when to lean on a lack of sound effects to build tension.

YOU DON'T NEED TO HAVE ANY INVESTMENT IN THE 20 YEARS OF TWISTING IDIOCY THAT IS THE RESIDENT EVIL BACKSTORY

Below: *Resident Evil VII* features odd emergent elements, such as the capacity to have your limbs sliced off in the heat of combat, with just a small window existing for you to reattach them before bleeding out.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



Oh good, dinner with the Baker family! OH GOD, what are you doing to that guy's hand? Are those maggots in the stew? We aren't trying to be rude, but *no thank you*.

8 HOURS



Can somebody please send help? There's some seriously horrible stuff going on in this house and we are paralysed, too afraid to move forward for fear of what lurks around the corner.

2 DAYS



Okay, time to tackle Madhouse, the game mode that ramps up the difficulty and makes the game even more old-school… or do we try and go for a four-hour speed run?



RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

In classic *Resident Evil* fashion, you'll spend a good amount of time managing your resources. It's such a small, but ultimately integral way of building tension and panic. Items are limited – as too is bag space, upgraded should you find larger hidden backpacks – and that means you'll need to be constantly looking to combine items. Though that is, in fact, a source of stress in itself; do you take the Green Herb immediately for a needed boost of health, or wait for the necessary chemicals to turn it into a larger health kit? *Resident Evil VII* is a constant struggle between these kinds of decisions and it's wonderfully engaging.



So too are your capabilities in combat. Every single weapon you acquire in *Resident Evil VII* feels different. As we mentioned before, Ethan is no STARS agent, and that means his proficiency with firearms is reduced, reflecting his position as a citizen that has stumbled unknowingly into a warped hellscape. There's a deliberate wobble to the way in which he handles himself when wielding a weapon. Again, in a nod to classic *Resi*, the best tactic and flow to combat is to gain some distance on your assailant, swivel 180 degrees, plant your feet and hope you don't miss those all-important headshots.

While *VII* does suffer from a critical lack of enemy variation, pitting you against the same family members – often in the form of ridiculous, lovingly-crafted boss battles – and just a handful of Molded enemy types time and time again, the aggressive AI systems more than make up for it. Game difficulty scales reactively in a similar fashion to that of *Resident Evil 4*, ensuring that you are rarely able to slip into a position of comfort or feel over-encumbered with items and ammunition – finding yourself forever on the back heel, hoping you can make every shot count, is exhaustingly exhilarating.

That's due, in large part, to the weapons feeling so damned liberating. After hours of being relentlessly pursued, blasting an enemy with a shotgun tends to be relatively cathartic. The monsters recoil and twist in pain when your shots connect – it has a clear and visible impact – and if headshots aren't working for you in a blind panic, you could always try dismemberment, which *always* has a way of achieving the intended results.

SYNTHESIS

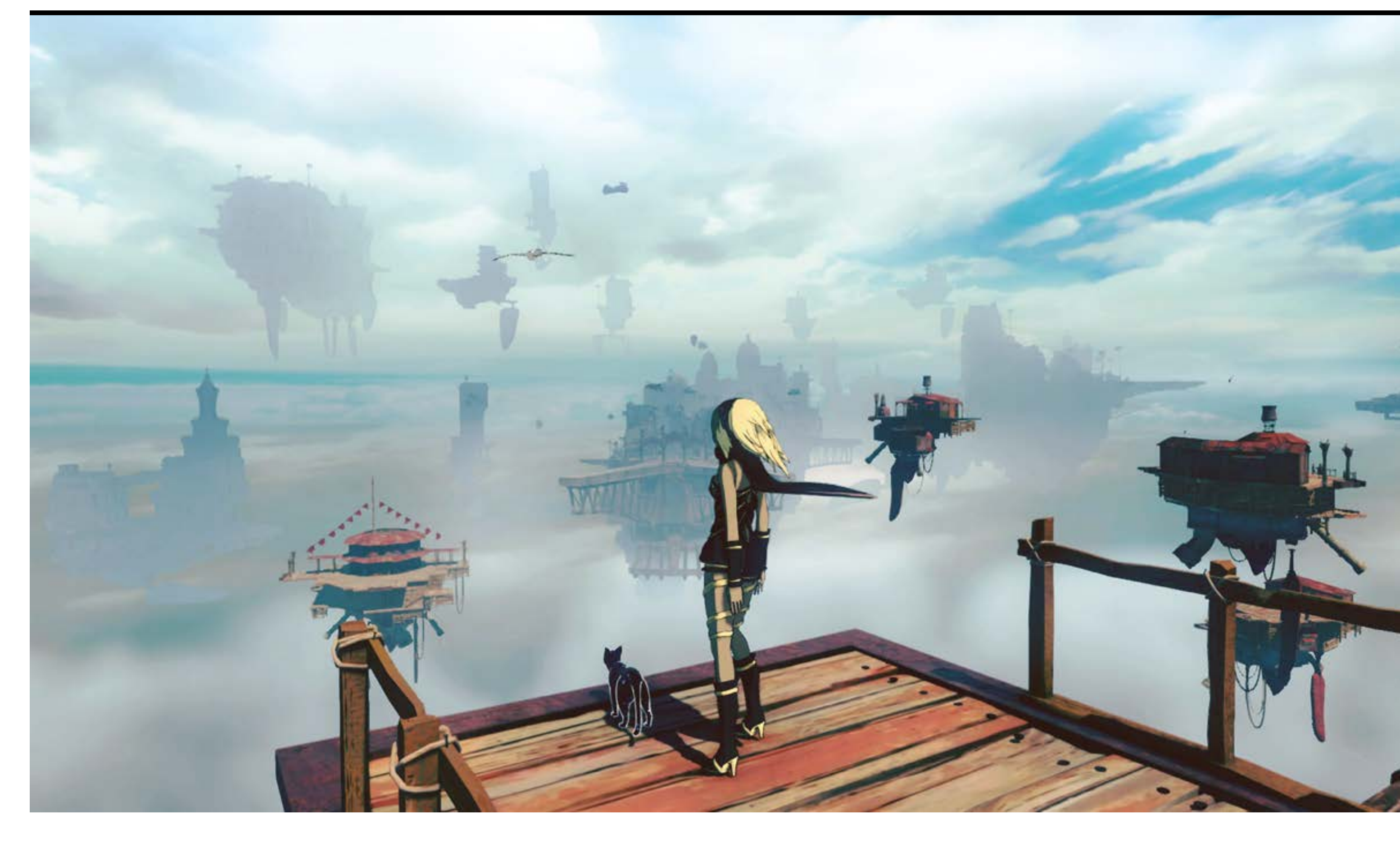
BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

UNWARRANTED AGGRESSION: While there have been other first-person horror games, the way Capcom integrates stealth, action and puzzle-solving is to be commended.

In many respects, *VII* feels like a microcosm of everything Capcom has attempted to do with the franchise over the last two decades, distilling down the series' core elements into one frightfully engaging package. The game morphs around you as you move deeper into its web, exchanging fragility for fleeting moments of empowerment, bewilderment and confusion with colour-coded keycards, and puzzle-solving, and it does it all within one perfectly designed and brilliantly executed interwoven game space. *Resident Evil VII* plays with a tenuous balance, shifting between power and fragility, action and stealth effortlessly, achieving its ambitions almost flawlessly – never outstaying its welcome, relentlessly pushing you forward while still giving you enough agency to backtrack and breathe.

Resident Evil VII is exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure. It's a brave and bold move for Capcom, feeling quintessentially classic while still feeling fresh and adventurous in its ambitions. Ultimately, *Resident Evil VII* is a breathtaking return to form for a series we long thought had abandoned any hope of redemption.

VERDICT 9/10
A BREATHTAKING RETURN TO FORM



TURNING YOUR WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Gravity Rush 2

Above: Landscapes in *Gravity Rush 2* can range dramatically, but each one is rendered with impressively artistic palettes. Even here in the underworld mining zone, the mucky browns are merely a carrier from the pops of pink and green. It's always a dramatic aesthetic.

Gravity Rush 2 starts off as an excellent, imaginative sequel to one of the PS Vita's best titles, but it eventually evolves into a complex, colourful and utterly involving game that is one of the first sparkling gems of 2017.

Our gravity-defying heroine, Kat, is back, and although at first she's stripped of her powers – and her cat – she soon is back on form and more powerful than ever. The story starts out with you stranded far from the familiar world of Hekseville from the first game, on a mining boat with a nomadic troop who don't seem to be very friendly to Kat or Syd.

You'd be forgiven for thinking kicking the crud out of glowing balls to mine crystals isn't the *Gravity Rush* you know and love. It's not, but it's only temporary. As soon as you meet the first Nevi – the evil glowing beasts that plagued the first game – Dusty the cat is back, as are your basic gravitational powers.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Sony Japan Studio
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

It's not until the game takes you to the main city hub of Jirga Para Lhao that things really get interesting. It takes Hekseville and makes everything bigger, better, brighter and far more interesting. Heck, it's even got a message on class, with the rich occupying gigantic mansions on the higher levels of the floating city, and the poor living in shanty towns on the lower tiers.

But ultimately, it's a massive world that's littered with a variety of side quests, challenges and story missions that will keep you busy way past the 20 hour mark, and hooked for longer.

GRAVITY RUSH 2 IS A COMPLEX, COLOURFUL AND UTTERLY INVOLVING GAME THAT IS ONE OF THE FIRST SPARKLING GEMS OF 2017

Kat's relationship with the mining folk of Banga builds when she saves them from the Nevi, so to begin with you're merely doing their bidding, fixing trade issues and rescuing their mined ore from the hands of nasty people.

But soon these troubles become embroiled in the class wars of Jirga Para Lhao at large, and Kat finds herself fighting for the lower classes taking on roles from casual revolutionary or jazz singer, to investigative reporter and reluctant servant-turned-rebel.

And that's just the main missions, too. It's easy to get distracted by the vast amount of side quests you'll come across throughout Jirga Para Lhao, which feature reoccurring colourful characters, such as a writer with a little too much imagination, a rubbish delivery man who'll have you carrying packages across the city even if they stink so much you occasionally pass out.

FAQs

Q. CAN I JUST PLAY GRAVITY RUSH 2?

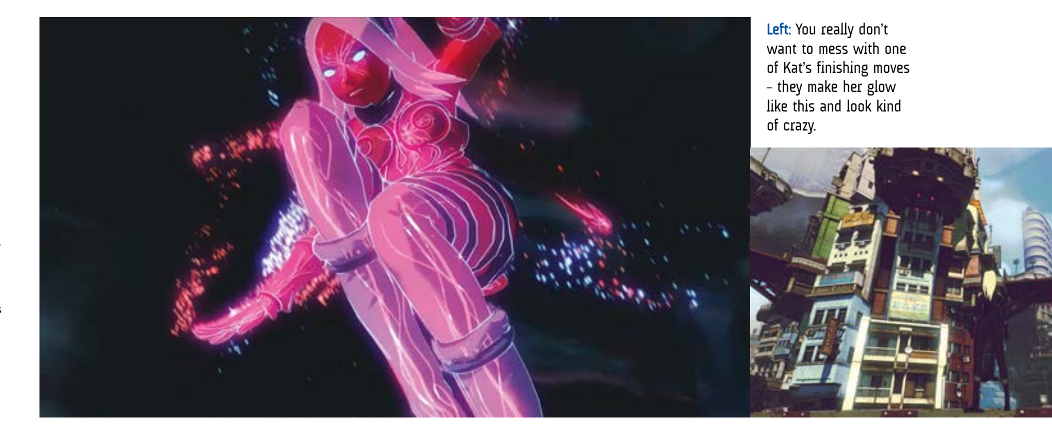
There are a lot of continued storylines and familiar faces, so we'd recommend catching up with Kat's backstory.

Q. WHAT DOES THE CAT DO?

Not a lot. Apart from the whole controlling gravity ability thing and rocking awesome cosmic fur.

Q. CAN I PLAY AS RAVEN?

Nope. Fellow gravity shifter Raven may be your BFF, but she's got her own thing going on.



Left: You really don't want to mess with one of Kat's finishing moves – they make her glow like this and look kind of crazy.



Below: The stealth sections might feel like a nice break from all that gravity bending, but with any false moves meaning an insta-fail, they can quickly leave you feeling irate. Sections where you can't use gravity in a game all about gravity may have been a mistake, to be honest.

Gravity Rush 2 quickly has far more gameplay content to offer than its predecessor, especially when you chuck in the various challenges such as time trials and scavenger hunts. It's incredibly difficult to find yourself bored in this town.

Frustration, though, can occur quite frequently. Kat's gravitational powers may have evolved for *Gravity Rush 2*, but the camera controls and enemy targeting can regularly leave you wanting to hurl your controller through the screen, especially in the later boss battles where precise timing and aim are crucial.

There are also strange new stealth sections where doing anything involving gravity bending is an incredibly annoying instant fail.

But thankfully, *Gravity Rush 2*'s gameplay has plenty to distract you from the irritations. Not only does it have the beauty and quirky elegance of a watercolour painting, there are also new gameplay features that make this the better of the two *Gravity Rush* titles.

If you've played the original *Gravity Rush*, you'll be familiar at first with Kat's gravitational powers. It's a simple tap of R1 to hover, aiming and then hitting R2 to send her flying through the air. You can even hit L2 for a gravity-powered ground slide, Square for a mid-air kick, or gather up the city's debris to use as projectiles.

But unlike the original *Gravity Rush*, it doesn't stop there. You might feel close to mastering Kat's powers by mid-way through the game, but it's then that the game really ramps up a notch, introducing entire new sets of moves one after another.

Lunar Style makes Kat lighter, faster and capable of long-distance jumps, while Jupiter Style is conversely focused on close-quarters combat, physical power and serious strength.

Combining these two and the classic Normal Style makes for some interesting combat techniques, balancing each ones advantages, limitations, special moves and movement styles. Suddenly *Gravity Rush 2*'s combat becomes an excellent mix of tactics, switching between abilities with a swipe of the touchpad and working out how to use your newfound powers.

It's really impressive just how much *Gravity Rush 2* manages to keep you on your toes, whether we're talking about the gameplay or the storyline. The tale may seem very predictable, but just like the gameplay, it will keep evolving and continuing just when you think – but not hope – the credits will be rolling.

You will be thrown into different scenarios, meet new characters and even a few old faces, but more importantly be constantly kept entertained and wanting more. Cinematic moments are done impressively well, the music swells and crests like you've got a live orchestra accompanying your gameplay and there is even a silly little selfie-focused mini-game that strays into creepy territory, just to keep you even more on your toes.

Gravity Rush 2 never ceases to amaze, really. It dishes up the frenetic gravity-defying action from the first game, but adds in several new layers that add a complexity to the gameplay that's refreshing and, although not necessarily needed, works incredibly well. This is game that really does its own brand of quirky complete justice and makes the most of its loveable heroine and stellar cast.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

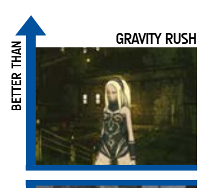
LIKE CATNIP: Our heroine Kat is back with black cat in tow, but more importantly some new moves, too. Make sure to try Jupiter Style's scenery-smashing gravity slide and Lunar Style's rocket leap.

GRAVITY RUSH 3?

Although no words have been spoken yet about a third *Gravity Rush* game, there's more than enough here to denote a sequel. Not only does the ending leave some things up in the air – no spoilers – there are enough recurring characters and places to make this a series for years to come. Whether it's the unique gameplay elements, our feline-focused heroine or the gorgeous art style, here's a PS4 exclusive that really stands out and doesn't get the attention it deserves.

It may even be that *Gravity Rush 3* lets us play a time as Raven, pulling a bit of a *Dishonored 2* with two playable protagonists.

BETTER THAN



GRAVITY RUSH

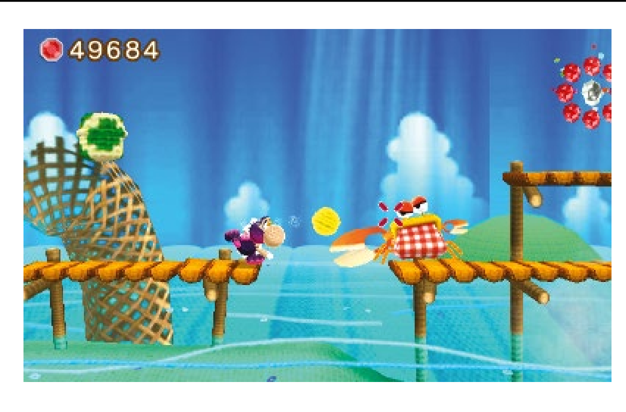
WORSE THAN



INFAMOUS

VERDICT 8/10

CAPTIVATING STORIES BLEND WELL WITH NEW GRAVITY POWERS





A REDUCED EXPERIENCE

Poochy & Yoshi's Woolly World

Once again Nintendo has managed to convert a Wii U title to 3DS without compromising too much of the original vision for the game. As such *Poochy & Yoshi's Woolly World* carries with it most of the strengths and a few of the weaknesses of its parent release. In the final balance you still have yet another quintessential *Yoshi* experience, scaled down beautifully for mobile play, but really not with enough innovation or challenge to make a lasting impression.

The wool aesthetic is a wonderful draw for this incarnation of our favourite dinosaur steed, bringing not only a new look to the series, but also some fun gameplay concepts too. This was also true of the original Wii U version, of course, although it must be said that much of the finer detail of the woollen world has been lost in the downscaling to 3DS. It means that some of the richness of this game goes with it, but it doesn't detract from the experience too substantially.

With Yoshi designing, Amiibo support and all of the collectables and unlockables of the game moving over to this release, an amazing job has been done to maintain as much of *Yoshi's Woolly World* as possible. You're still tasked with finding loose threads to slurp up and reveal new areas, eggs have been replaced by balls of wool and many of the bosses have some woollen aspect to their weak spot you can exploit. Good-Feel has fully embraced the concept, much as it did with Kirby, to offer some variety alongside familiar enemies and gameplay tricks.

The other addition to this game, and the reason why co-star Poochy gets his name on this port, is Poochy Dash, a new mode whose levels gradually unlock as you play through the game offering constant runner challenges, not entirely unlike *Super Mario Run*. Just like the main levels they are packed with collectables and offer plenty of replay value, although how exactly such a light addition has allowed Poochy to pinch top billing on this release escapes us. It's really not a significant enough addition to warrant Poochy knocking Yoshi off top spot. And we still prefer Yoshi's woolly Amiibo to Poochy's, even if it is another adorable addition to the collection.

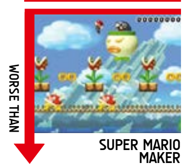
Ultimately the challenge that was lacking in the original game remains an issue, even if the level design is often inventive and fun. The badge system of temporary power-ups at the cost of gems collected in the game remains relatively inconsequential too. So, a little has been lost and a little has been gained in *Yoshi's Woolly* move to 3DS. We can certainly recommend this cute distraction, but with no great amount of fervour. Combined with *Super Mario Maker* though, it's a good time for platforming on the portable.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Good-Feel
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: SONIC LOST WORLD

WORSE THAN: SUPER MARIO MAKER



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

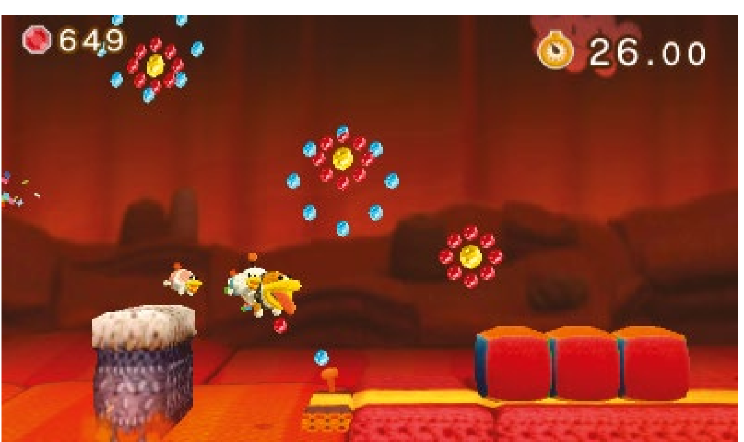
POOCHY POWER: The only major addition to this version is the Poochy Dash mode, a series of bonus stages where you must lead Poochy in an endless running-style platforming challenge.

VERDICT 7/10

MAINTAINS MOST OF THE FUN, BUT LOSES SOME STYLE

Below: As you would expect, the graphical downgrade from Wii U means that some of the finer detail of the wool world has been lost, which is an unavoidable shame. It still works well as a gameplay tweak though.







The battle system looks hectic, but is rooted in strategy.

A RETURN TO FORM

Tales Of Berseria

It's been just over a year since Bandai Namco released the disappointing *Tales Of Zestiria*, and after a string of weak releases in the series, the long-running *Tales Of* series needs something drastic to shake it up. *Tales Of Berseria* takes all of the usual series tropes and subverts them with one key element: you're not one of the good guys this time around.

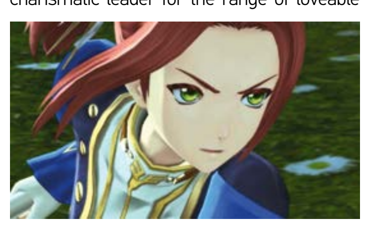
Our story is centred around Velvet, who is driven by the trauma of her past, as well as being locked up in prison for three years. This is a pretty welcome change from the usual aloof male protagonist who always has the same backstory and origin. This archetype has been completely subverted for *Tales Of Berseria*. Velvet is fierce, strong and a charismatic leader for the range of loveable rejects you pick up along the way. The game tackles themes like becoming an outcast, belonging and learning to trust again in a way that the series has never done before.

Additionally, the game keeps building upon a fun and satisfying battle system that has you building combos by customising which moves string into each other on each command. You're also able to play as any character in your party, meaning that if one particular character doesn't stick with you, you're able to switch them out on the fly. The satisfying combat is the bread and butter in *Tales Of Berseria*, but the world that houses it is quite disappointing.

Despite the strength of the characters and battle system, one big hangover from previous games is that exploring the world doesn't amount to much aside from running around on a white map that's covered in snow. The generic fantasy style is almost exactly the same as any other JRPG on the market, there are no huge distinguishing features that really make it compelling. The later dungeons do become more visually interesting, but for most of the game the actual setting is completely forgettable.

The real heart of *Tales of Berseria* is the journey that you and your party go on featuring little character moments or 'skits' and your party will chat to each other about mundane inanities, but as you play the game, these moments build up to create one of the most memorable casts of characters that the decades-old series has seen.

Tales of Berseria is a real return to form, and stands up on its own as a great traditional Japanese RPG as well as a good action game as a whole. With a fantastic combat system to rival even the greatest action games, *Tales Of Berseria* has a way to go, but is the best entry to the series in years.





FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3,PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (local)
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
TALES OF ZESTIRIA

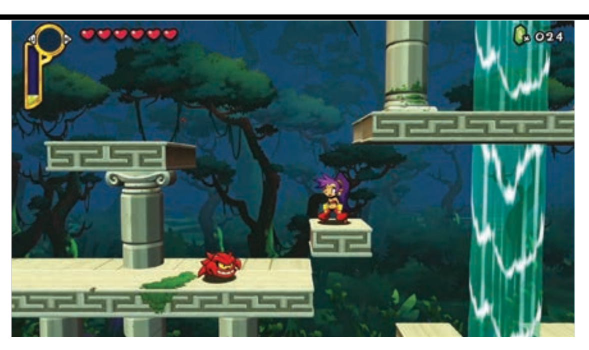


WORSE THAN
TALES OF SYMPHONIA

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL
THE DARK SIDE: It's incredibly refreshing to play a more morally ambiguous character.



IT'S RARELY BEEN SO GOOD TO BE BAD



ENCHANTÉ!

Shantae: Half-Genie Hero

There's something to be said for a colourful game right now. As more and more titles move towards ultrarealistic visuals and a 4K resolution, it's refreshing to fire up *Shantae*'s latest adventure and be blown away by the cartoon-like appearance and whimsy that eminates from every pore.

This is a lovely platformer, then, that makes you smirk at the ridiculous nature of what you're seeing. The titular Shantae is, as you'd expect, half-genie (but all hero), and her idle animation is a sight to behold: it's a weird shimmy-cum-groovy-dance from side to side that's almost hypnotic, while the residents of her home are equally colourful and daft.

Despite developer WayForward's pedigree for games involving jumping, *Shantae* actually has something of Metroidvania about it. The levels seem straightforward at first, asking you to run from left to right, hit enemies, collect their gems (the currency you need to spend in the shop) and beat a boss at the end – as you'd expect.

It's only when you realise each level hides multiple secrets, collectibles and new dances, that *Half-Genie Hero* becomes something greater. These dances (there's plenty of them) allow our heroine to transform into something that has abilities she doesn't possess, allowing her to get high, lower, underwater... you get the picture. That water you swam across? Now you can transform into a crab and go underneath to find secret treasures. What about that platform that looks impossible to get to? You can transform into a spider and throw your web to it. Yes it's ridiculous, but it's also great fun and rewards exploration.

Going even further than that simple idea, each level begs to be explored over and over. Even after collecting dances, you can grab hidden items that enhance them. One item allows the mermaid to attack, which gives you another reason to revisit the very first level to get that final collectible that eludes you.

If there's a black mark it's that the difficulty is very uneven. Some levels seem impossible to get through without taking damage, while the latter bosses fall off a cliff in terms of difficulty. If you've spent any amount of time upgrading your health with items, you'll breeze through the final sections without even trying.

But the platforming is tight, the voice acting (though sparse) is humorous and the music is phenomenal. It's not the longest game, and most people will blast through it in five or six hours simply because it's so addictive finding every single hidden nook and cranny.

Shantae is one of those gems you wouldn't have considered because it looks like it's for kids, but this is a rip-roaring platformer with personality to spare. We didn't expect to love this as much as we do, but it's genuinely one of the most pleasant surprises in a long time.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS Vita, Xbox One, Wii U
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: WayForward Technologies
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

MIGHTY NO. 9





WORSE THAN

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

A DEEPER CAMPAIGN: While there's replayability after completion on higher difficulties, this is a game that could have been truly special with a few more levels and some tougher bosses. One of the last bosses shouldn't be easier than the first, really.

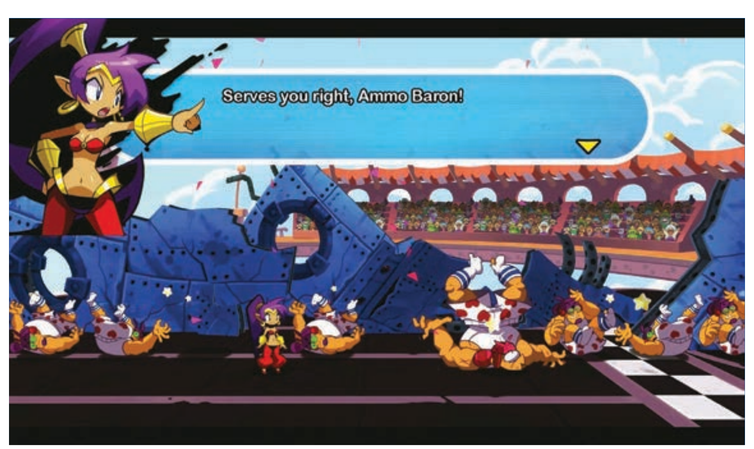
VERDICT 8/10
A DELIGHTFUL SURPRISE THAT'LL WARM YOUR HEART

Below: The bosses are always creative looking, but the earlier encounters are the best because you're overpowered for the later ones. They all hark back to a more old-fashioned game design, which, here, is a huge positive.





Above: The overworld is where you can choose which level you want to play, but it also shows you how many collectibles and secrets remain. You'll have to remember which skills you need, because it doesn't tell you what's missing on the map.



PERFECT FOR YOUR FIRST ADVENTURE?

The Little Acre

We all have fond memories of videogames from our childhoods that made us fall in love with the medium, or even a particular genre, and you can well imagine *The Little Acre* being just such a title for a young generation of adventure game players who will be drawn in by its delightful hand-drawn art, endearing characters and simple puzzles.

The game has you take control of two protagonists – the vanilla, though likable, Aidan and his effervescent daughter Lily – switching between the two as they try to track each other down after inadvertently discovering a portal that transports them to a fantastic and dangerous world. Cue a series of traditional point-and-click puzzles that require you to combine items you can pick up and add to your inventory with obstacles preventing your progress.

The Little Acre makes a couple of sensible design choices that make it accessible to a younger audience and that circumvent some of the pitfalls veteran adventure game players will be familiar with. Every object you can interact with is highlighted, so there's no scouring every inch of the screen for a key item you don't want to miss. In a similar vein, the game tends to prevent backtracking, leaving you secure in the knowledge that you've got everything you need to solve a puzzle in your immediate vicinity.

It's a shame that *The Little Acre* hasn't quite cast off all the frustrations associated with adventure games of old, however. Too often, the solutions to its puzzles rely on experimentation rather than logic (how do you find the key to the locked door? Scare the cat with the mask, obviously!). This doesn't mean you are going to get stuck – as we've mentioned, the game limits you to a few options at any one time – but it does mean that *The Little Acre* fails to deliver those exhilarating shots of intellectual satisfaction you get from puzzles built on deduction.

This is particularly disappointing given the length of the game: it can comfortably be completed in under two hours. We like shorter experiences, but we expect a game this brief to be dense with clever ideas and innovative puzzles. The repeated use of the 'uh oh, the thing you have to use has broken' trope as a setup, and the 'use what you have in your inventory on what is in your way' approach as the road to a solution is what you get in reality.

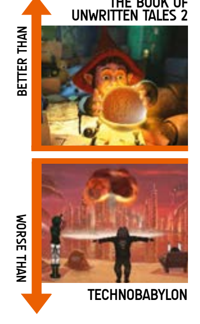
The Little Acre has what you might call a provincial charm, a certain quality of pleasantness. It is pretty. It is uncomplicated. It is a game that you want to love. It's unfortunate that it is also a game that leaves you thinking: 'is that it?', when it comes to a close.

If you are looking for 'my first adventure game' for a younger player, this fits the bill. Though even they, we suspect, will be looking for something of more substance by the time they're done.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Ireland
PUBLISHER: Curve Digital
DEVELOPER: Pewter Games Studios
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, Intel Core2 Duo E4300 or equivalent or AMD Athlon 64 X2 5000+ or equivalent, 2GB RAM, GeForce GT 610 or equivalent or Radeon HD 6450 or equivalent, 3500MB storage needed

BETTER THAN: THE BOOK OF UNWRITTEN TALES 2



WORSE THAN: TECHNOBABYLON

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FAMILY FORTUNES: It feels like there's more to draw out of *The Little Acre*'s likeable characters and their relationships. There's potential for a sequel that could do more on that front.

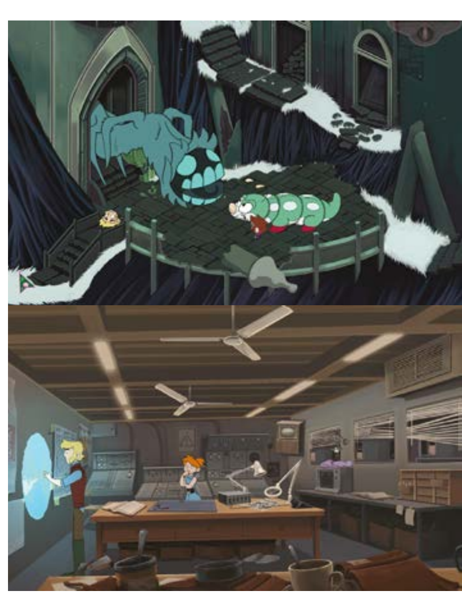
VERDICT 6/10

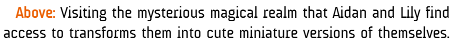
CHARMING BUT LEAVES YOU FEELING UNDERWHELMED



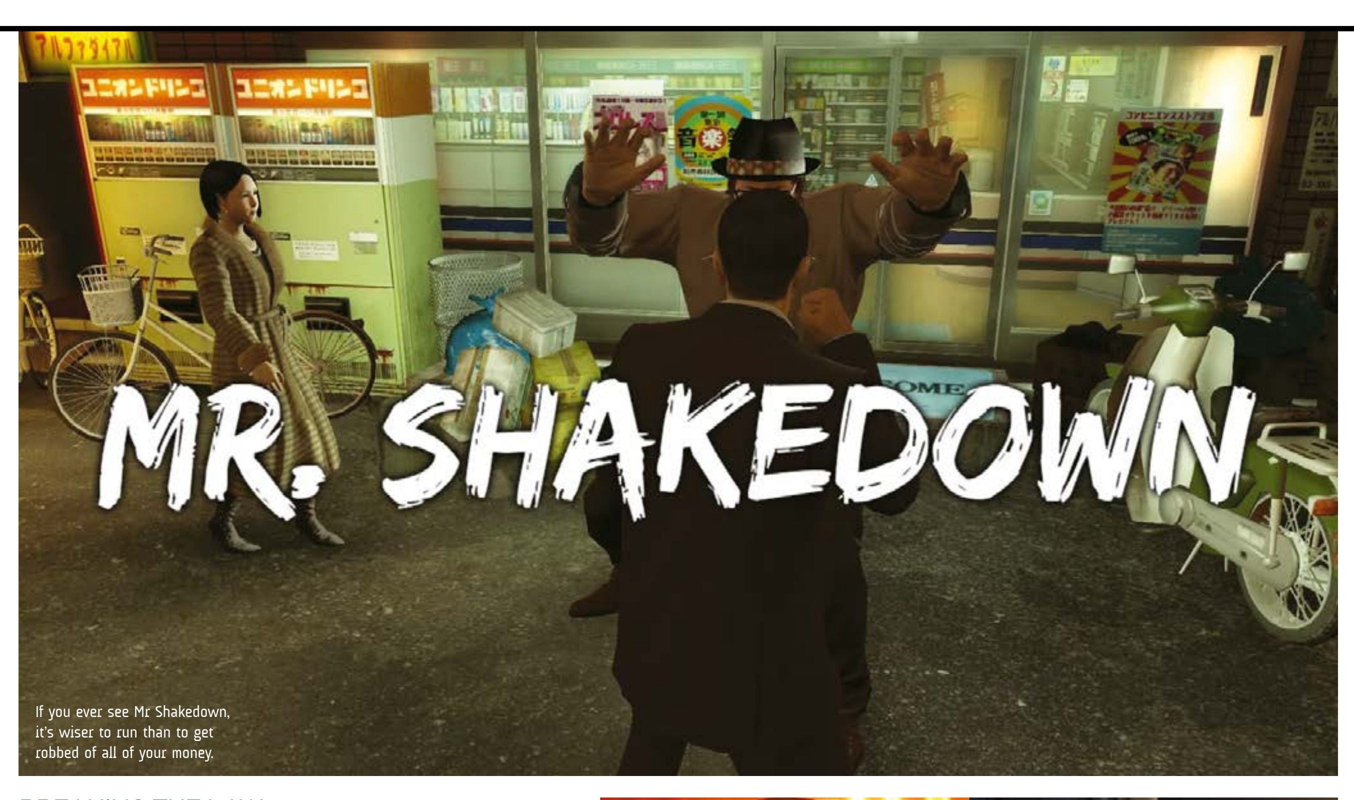
Below: Aidan and Lily live alone in the Irish countryside with their adorable dog Dougal, but the memory of Aidan's missing father hangs over the house.







Above: Visiting the mysterious magical realm that Aidan and Lily find access to transforms them into cute miniature versions of themselves.



If you ever see Mr Shakedown, it's wiser to run than to get robbed of all of your money.

BREAKING THE LAW

Yakuza 0

The streets of *Yakuza 0*'s Kamurocho are the definition of excess: teeming with hostess bars, aimless drunken salarymen and a complex criminal underworld that lies beneath it all. However, underneath the veneer of Japan's economic success of the Eighties is a game that has an incredible sense of humour and oodles of personality.

Yakuza has been a difficult series for new players, however *Yakuza 0* takes you back to the origins of its two most notorious characters, Kazuma Kiryu and Goro Majima. Kiryu finds himself tangled in a web of complex criminal conspiracy, with Majima managing an upmarket hostess bar in Osaka. It's a lengthy story mode that will take you at least 50 hours to finish.

The characters in *Yakuza 0* are quirky, with moments of humour such as a minigame where you have to dodge punches from a drunk man simply to frustrate him. These types of quirks set the world's tone, with the main story taking a backseat from the absurd world. As you explore, you can pick up side-missions which can vary from beating up thugs for stealing a game from a young child, to breaking up a gang of schoolgirls selling their underwear to men who try to take advantage of them. There's no lack of these side-missions either, with many triggering a cutscene simply by walking past an NPC.

As you explore Kamurocho and Sotenbori, you'll be sure to run into all manner of people wanting to pick a fight with you – and this is where *Yakuza 0*'s combat shines. You unlock a variety of fighting styles between characters and string combos together that make the game feel like a souped-up, *3D Streets of Rage*. Each punch that you throw feels incredibly weighty and makes the combat feel satisfying. One of the biggest highlights is *Yakuza 0*'s over-the-top Heat moves, which can vary from pouring salt into someone's eyes to just straight up curbstomping them.

The world is brimming with detail, you can also participate in minigames like trying your hand at karaoke, where *Yakuza 0* becomes a rhythm game for all of three minutes. Did we mention that there's a full version of *Space Harrier* to play when you walk into the arcade? There are an absurd amount of activities to distract yourself with should you get bored of knocking out thugs with bicycles. God forbid.

Yakuza 0 is a triumph of world design, and while it might not boast a massive map, the ones that are there are packed full of detail. Additionally, with the game serving as a prequel, it's also an excellent starting point for many new to the series.



FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 online
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

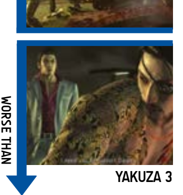


BETTER THAN

SLEEPING DOGS



WORSE THAN



YAKUZA 3

The streets are awash in it, and the Tojo yakuza

FINGERPRINT

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LET'S GET PHYSICAL: You can make use of almost any object in this game as a weapon… that's right, even traffic cones.



ONE OF THE MOST DETAILED OPEN WORLDS TO DATE

THE ORIGINAL SPACE MARINES RETURN

Space Hulk: Deathwing



Above: Seeing iconic beasts like the Genestealers is likely to give a *Warhammer 40K* fan a real kick, but don't expect much else.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Streum On Studio/Cyanide
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7/8/10 (64-bit), Intel Core i5-2400/AMD FX-8320, 8GB RAM, 2GB graphics, DirectX 11
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
TURNING POINT: FALL OF LIBERTY

WORSE THAN
WARHAMMER: END TIMES – VERMINTIDE

One of the potential pitfalls with a game based around a licensed property, especially one that is a fairly deep cut from a niche like *Warhammer 40K*, is that outside of the hardcore fan base – who frankly aren't going to care as much as to what a review is going to say about the game – you're either going to have to explain a lot of what is going on to build the world and story for newcomers or you'd best be delivering a good game. *Space Hulk: Deathwing* does neither.

As a Librarian, a type of Space Marine that has psychic abilities, you lead a squad through a decrepit Space Hulk seeking a Death Angel ship from a bygone age. The place, predictably, has been overrun by the infamous *40K* Xenomorph-a-like, the Tyranid. The scene is set for a tactical, squad-based FPS, where you command teammates to seal doors and… well, open doors for you too. Sometimes they follow you or maybe even heal you. There's not much else to the tactical side and the AI is pretty dim, so you end up just doing a lot yourself and hoping they're going to do something about the hoard of enemies rushing up a corridor.

The Space Marines are all hefty lads and what should be some satisfying, chunky movement and combat instead feels sluggish and plodding, which seems to be the main theme of the overall game. Plod to mission waypoint, trigger the objective and deal with the inevitable spawning enemies then start plodding to the next one. The game hints at an interesting vitality system, where different body parts have their own health meters, but all this means is that you die if one part takes too much damage. Levelling up is a simple case of taking acquired experience points and spending them in one of four skill trees that unlock new abilities as you pump more in. You can get health, better damage resistance, more damage dealt – the usual stuff from every other skill tree. It's just so uninspiring and generic. Menus look amateurish and are awkward to navigate, especially the radial menu that controls your AI counterparts. A real shame, as the architecture and dark tone of the *40K* universe is captured wonderfully, and really deserves more.

It fairs a bit better in multiplayer. You can choose to be a class different from the Librarian, and there's even an option to have the entire skill tree unlocked from the start, which can make for some nice and much-needed variation in the combat. Communicating and planning attack strategies is significantly more fun when you're not contending with the poor AI but despite this, it isn't quite enough to distract from the fact that the core of this game is fundamentally boring. It's so dull that it's hard to find the enthusiasm to end this review properly.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

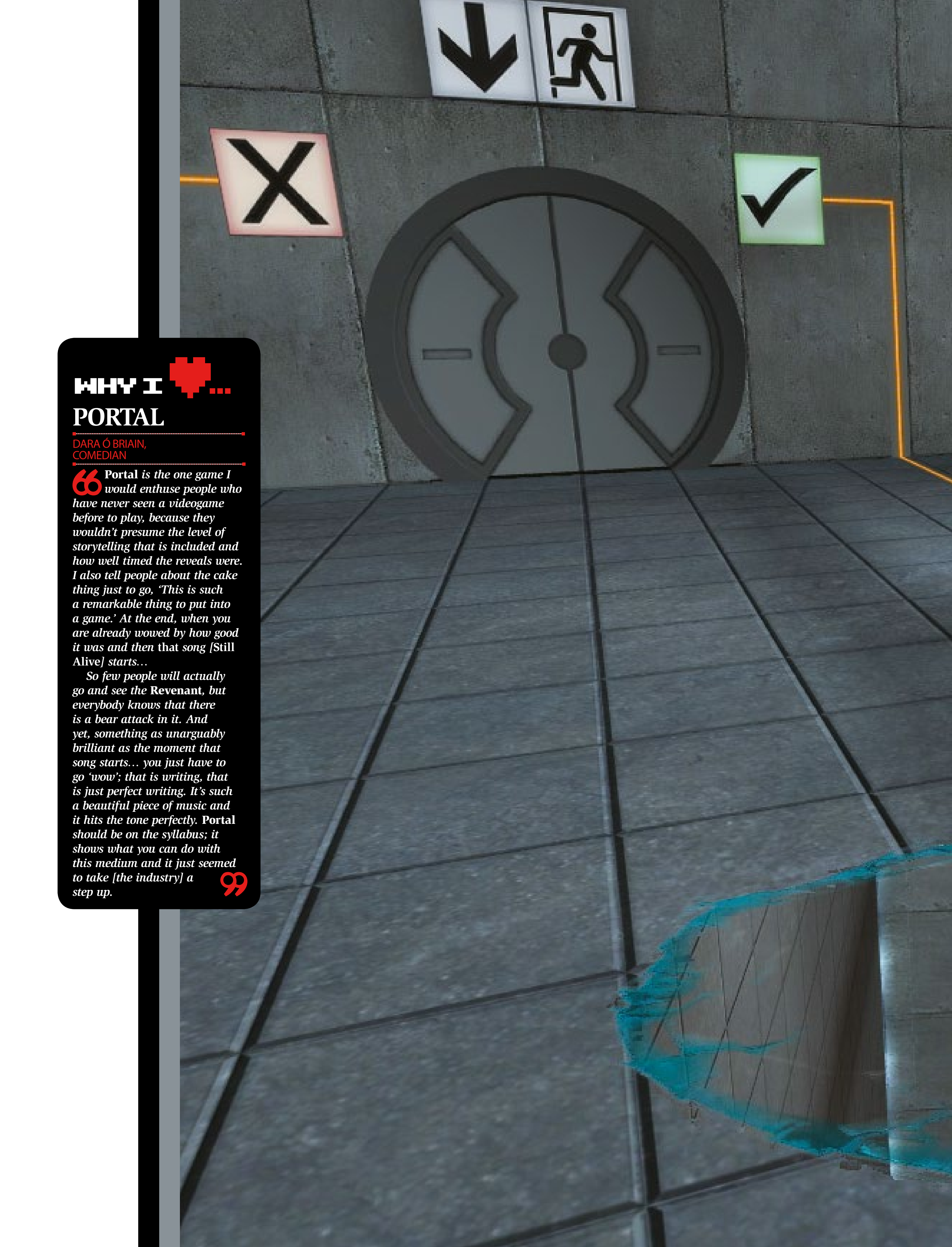
COPIED AND PASTED: There needs to be so much more variety than what is on offer. Enemy encounters are predictable and the objectives are all variations on a theme. Anything more would be welcome.



Above: Deathwing's strongest suite is its art direction, which captures the gothic sci-fi stylings of the source material extremely well.



A REALLY DISAPPOINTING WASTE OF THE 40K LICENCE



WHY I ♥...

PORTAL

DARA Ó BRIAIN, COMEDIAN

"**Portal** *is the one game I would enthuse people who have never seen a videogame before to play, because they wouldn't presume the level of storytelling that is included and how well timed the reveals were. I also tell people about the cake thing just to go, 'This is such a remarkable thing to put into a game.' At the end, when you are already wowed by how good it was and then that song [*Still Alive*] starts…*

So few people will actually go and see the **Revenant**, *but everybody knows that there is a bear attack in it. And yet, something as unarguably brilliant as the moment that song starts… you just have to go 'wow'; that is writing, that is just perfect writing. It's such a beautiful piece of music and it hits the tone perfectly.* **Portal** *should be on the syllabus; it shows what you can do with this medium and it just seemed to take [the industry] a step up.*"



“Portal should be on the syllabus”

DARA Ó BRIAIN, COMEDIAN

RETRO



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DIZZY

games™ speaks to the Oliver twins and celebrates the 30th anniversary of one of Codemasters' most iconic franchises

ASK THE AVERAGE gamer today who Dizzy is and they'll most likely give you a befuddled look and go back to racking up a huge kill streak on *Call Of Duty*. He might not have the pulling power he once did (a planned *Dizzy* kickstarter failed miserably when it was attempted in 2012) but Dizzy used to be a huge deal to anyone who owned a home computer in the late Eighties and early Nineties. He's arguably one of the most iconic characters from that period, thanks to a large number of great adventure games that stood apart from similar titles that were available. While the original release was a slow burner, later *Dizzy* games would typically shoot straight to the top of the charts, helped by fantastic reviews and a easily affordable budget price tag. With Dizzy now celebrating his 30th anniversary we felt the time was perfect to look back at the many, many games he appeared in and ask the Oliver twins key questions about some of the most interesting titles in *Dizzy*'s rich and diverse catalogue. How many of the following eggshellent gems did you experience?



DIZZY 1987

VARIOUS

Dizzy may well have been one of the most famous gaming icons of the Eighties, but his actual creation (to quote Indie band, James) was born of frustration. Philip Oliver had been tinkering around with Panda Sprites whilst working on *Ghost Hunters* and was annoyed that his couldn't create a facial expression for his new creation, Hunk Studbuckle. Hunk eventually became egg-shaped, gained boots and gloves and was given a rotation function that allowed him to roll around the screen. Work resumed on *Ghost Hunters* and the new character Philip had created became the focus for their next game.

Dizzy's fantasy world setting was inspired by the brothers' love for cartoons, which they would typically watch while taking breaks from coding. Impressed by the distinctive visual look of graphic adventure *The Hobbit*, they focused on creating beautiful looking locations and then added a puzzle-based structure that would require Dizzy to collect specific items and use them in new places to continue his quest. Amazingly, the Darlings weren't too keen on the finished game the twins produced, but agreed to publish it anyway as the previous titles the brothers had made had all been hit sellers for them.

Ignore the fact that it has one of the most annoying traps in an 8-bit videogame (if you fail to cross the bridge in a certain way the game becomes impossible to complete) and *Dizzy* still holds up well today. Once you get used to the way Dizzy rolls around the screen, you'll find it's incredibly fun to leap around the well-designed locations; although avoiding enemies isn't the easiest thing in the world due to their erratic movement patterns. The puzzles throughout *Dizzy* are clever without ever feeling too obtuse, while the structure of the game is well thought out. It's only really let down by an annoying inventory system that only lets you carry one item at a time, meaning a lot of back tracking.





TREASURE ISLAND DIZZY 1988

VARIOUS

Dizzy was a slow burner for Codemasters, slowly selling more and more cassettes and gaining increasing fan mail over time. The Darlings took note of this and commissioned the Olivers to create a sequel which they turned around in less than two months. In many ways, *Treasure Island Dizzy* was a huge improvement over the original game as it addressed a number of small niggles with the first game, whilst also adding elements that would increase its longevity.

The biggest difference was to *Dizzy*'s inventory system, which ensured there was far less backtracking. It was now possible to carry three items at a time, with one item eventually being dropped if a fourth was picked up. Another big change to the game was the introduction of 30 coins that were often put in out of the way areas that the twins hoped would encourage further exploration. A number of coins were also hidden behind items, meaning players really had their work cut out to find them all. *Treasure Island Dizzy* also introduced underwater sections that could be entered if Dizzy had access to a snorkel, which further added to the sequel's variety. It's something of a shame then an oversight in the inventory design (the brothers realised too late that dropping the snorkel underwater would cause Dizzy to continually drown) meant the player only had a single life to try and complete the game with.



FAST FOOD

VARIOUS

Although Dizzy is best known for his adventures, he appeared in a number of arcade-styled action games too, many of which were of varying quality. Fast Food was the first such example and was created by the Oliver Twins in a single weekend after taking a break from working on *Grand Prix Simulator 2*.

Noting a gap in the market and wanting to create a maze game for the Amstrad, the brothers created a 30-level game by the Monday morning and then spent a further two weeks tweaking the game menu and improving its visuals. Considering the surprisingly short development period *Fast Food* proved to be a fun *Pac-Man* clone with Dizzy trying to chow down on a variety of different foods (including chicken, bizarrely) whilst avoiding angry enemies. Originally planned for a December release, it ended up being pushed back to the following March after a deal with the restaurant chain Happy Eater fell through.

THE OLIVER TWINS ON... THE ORIGINAL DIZZY

Where did the idea for *Dizzy* originate?

Philip Oliver: We loved cartoons and wanted to create a new original cartoon character. We liked action platform games and we had enjoyed playing text adventures – initially *Zork* on the Apple IIe, but then, *Philosopher's Quest* & *Sphinx Adventure* on the BBC. The idea was to pull all these elements together into one fun and easily accessible, bright and friendly game.

Did you realise how frustrating the bridge trap was at the time of release?

Andrew Oliver: The bridge over the skeleton pit on the first *Dizzy* game was probably too frustrating on reflection… although, there's a fine balance to creating that 'Doh! I'll do it next time!' feeling and the game did go on to become massively popular. So, like the one life in *Treasure Island Dizzy* that we also consider a mistake, both games contained the magic ingredients that made them very successful and fondly remembered 30 years on! So were those frustrations contributing to the success? Would they have been even more successful if altered? I guess we'll never know.

Is it true that *Dizzy* didn't really take off until the release of the sequel?

PO: When *Dizzy* first appeared, it meant nothing to anyone. It had a standing start and as a result sold slowly compared to our previous three games which all had easily recognisable subjects – *Super Robin Hood*, *Ghost Hunters* and *Grand Prix Simulator*. Codemasters didn't even want to publish it, but did so, to keep us happy as it was finished and our previous games had all been #1 best sellers! We asked them to add "The Ultimate Cartoon Adventure" on the front – thinking surely that's what player craved. They chose to also add "By the Oliver Twins – authors of *Grand Prix Simulator*" which was the current UK #1 game and getting a lot of press, as they felt this would help it sell.

Was he purposely created as a mascot?

AO: Not at all, but after seeing other companies adopt mascots we did want Codemasters to adopt Dizzy as their mascot, and always nudged it in that direction where we could. They never full adopted it, though.



FANTASY WORLD DIZZY 1989

VARIOUS

■ *Fantasy World Dizzy* is seen by many as one of the best games in the series. Realising their mistake with the single life in *Treasure Island*, the brothers went back to the original system, ensuring their sequel was far easier to complete. They also subtly redefined the inventory system – only two items can be carried, but you can select which one you want to drop or use - and greatly expanded the size of the game, making it truly gigantic in scope. By far the biggest addition to the series though was the introduction of Dizzy's relatives, the Yolk Folk, who further enhanced Dizzy's world and added even more personality to it. Interestingly, it's also notable for being the first *Dizzy* game to feature copyright of Codemasters and the Oliver Twins, something the twins knew nothing about until it hit shelves. The action (Codemasters had already trademarked the name without the Olivers knowing) would ultimately drive a wedge between both pairs of siblings.



MAGIC LAND DIZZY 1990

VARIOUS

■ *Magic Land Dizzy* would become the first *Dizzy* adventure that the twins wouldn't actually code themselves. The brothers were hard at work on *The Fantastic Adventures Of Dizzy* for the NES (one of many updated *Dizzy* games that would eventually appear on the system) and didn't have time to work on games for the still lucrative home computer market. Having formed Dizzy Enterprises, the brothers sub-contracted Big Red Software and subsequently got to work on its story and design; giving the development team the chance to create their own adventure.

The end result was a genuinely great game that features some of our favourite puzzles from the series and has all the core ingredients found in earlier adventures, including the ever-present inventory system (back up to three slots). The clever puzzles largely focused on the carnage that has once again been caused by the evil wizard Zak – Dizzy's long-time nemesis who has been hounding him since the very first game. Zak has imprisoned all of Dizzy's friends in clever and elaborate ways and Dizzy must solve each unique puzzle in order to save them all. *Magic Land Dizzy* was also notable for being the very first *Dizzy* adventure to feature an energy bar, a great idea that certainly took the sting out of rapidly losing lives if you found yourself awkwardly placed next to an enemy. In a very clever touch, Dizzy's energy bar could be greatly replenished by picking up the many diamonds that had been scattered around the game world.









KWIK SNAX 1990

VARIOUS

This fun puzzle game was designed by Philip Oliver and coded by Lyndon Sharp and eventually appeared across a number of different home systems. Like *Fast Food*, it's another maze-based action game where Dizzy must collect food while avoiding numerous enemies. The difference here, however, is that the lovable egg can manipulate the walls of the maze to create new escape routes and crush enemies. The 24 mazes were spread across four distinct worlds (each housing a captured Yolk Folk) and weren't too difficult to complete, although the 20 slippery bonus stages that were included did ramp up the difficulty factor somewhat.





SPELLBOUND DIZZY 1991

VARIOUS

Spellbound Dizzy is the second *Dizzy* adventure that Big Red Software was commissioned to create and it's arguably its most epic effort. It's also the first *Dizzy* game where the original concept wasn't by the twins (instead Philip went through the team's design and added improvements where necessary). The game itself was absolutely massive with over 100 screens to adventure through. It featured numerous new mechanics including Dizzy's ability to swim (once he has found a pair of flippers) and the fact that Dizzy now took damage if he fell from a certain distance (as always energy could be recharged by collecting the relevant item). The standard interface of previous games had been greatly overhauled (healing items and collectible items were now separated) and Dizzy could access minecarts and discover hidden passages.

Interestingly, a smaller version of the game, called *Spellbound Dizzy Lite* was released exclusively on the Commodore 64 as part of *Dizzy's Excellent Adventures*. Greatly cut down and buggy, a complete version of the game was later released as a standalone budget title. It's still worth tracking down though as the music that plays on it is absolutely fantastic.

BUBBLE DIZZY 1991

VARIOUS



Bubble Dizzy, like *Dizzy Down The Rapids*, originally started off as a minigame for *The Fantastic Adventures Of Dizzy*. We're going to focus on *Bubble Dizzy* here, as it's the far better game, although it's still not a patch on earlier efforts like *Fast Food*. Each deep sea level had Dizzy trying to reach the surface by walking on the ever-rising bubbles that were present, while avoiding any enemies that got in his way. Bubbles only lasted for a short amount of time before they popped and the player also had to keep an eye on his energy and oxygen levels. Decent enough, but a little too fiddly in retrospect.

THE OLIVER TWINS ON... THE SPIN-OFFS



Why create Dizzy spin-offs?

Andrew Oliver: Whilst working on *Grand Prix Simulator 2*, we realised that we had all the skills to now write a maze game very quickly and if we did it would be good fun, and if we put Dizzy in it – it would sell really well and be out in time for Christmas. We sadly missed Christmas which is another story in the book, nevertheless it still sold very well.

They weren't always as critically well received as the core games. Why was that?

Philip Oliver: *Dizzy* adventures had a proven formula, had their own space in the market, were very creative, but took longer to design. Each spin-off was new and therefore experimental. Some like *Fast Food*, *Kwik Snax* and *Bubble Dizzy* worked really well, whilst others didn't. We and Codemasters considered it okay to release sub-optimal games, because people liked new, fresh variety and some people would really like them. I knew when working on *Panic Dizzy* that it wasn't as fun as I wanted, but it was certainly high enough quality to be released for a budget price.

What's your favourite spin-off?

AO: Probably the first, *Fast Food*, but *Kwik Snax*, renamed *Go! Dizzy Go!* on consoles, worked really well and looked great.

What was the most successful spin-off and what sort of figures did it do?

PO: *Fast Food* was the most successful. Sales figures got harder to see when Codemasters changed all the accounts to percentages of revenue, with different percentages on each format, when other people were involved and when sold in compilations or through third party distributors across Europe. But I think, across all formats, and with compilations included it was probably something like 250,000 copies and that probably resulted in something like £30,000 for us. Not bad for a few days work! Actually it was probably our highest grossing work days ever!

DIZZY: PRINCE OF THE YOLK FOLK 1991

VARIOUS



This was the third and final *Dizzy* adventure that was contracted out to Big Red Software and it was another huge success for everyone involved. It's a relatively small *Dizzy* game compared to other adventures in the series as it was originally planned as an exclusive game for the *Dizzy's Excellent Adventures* compilation that Codemasters released. Camerica also released the game in America with the new name *Dizzy The Adventurer*.

Everything about *Prince Of The Yolk Folk* was superb, the puzzles were clever and well thought out, the fantasy world setting burst with life, while the useful energy bar found in *Magic Land Dizzy* made an appearance again. In fact, it became so popular it was remade for iOS and Android and rereleased in 2011.

THE OLIVER TWINS ON… WONDERLAND DIZZY



How did you discover this lost game?

Philip Oliver: Bizarrely we'd forgotten about it. It was only when on stage at Play! Blackpool retro event in May 2015 I held up a map, something I'd grabbed from my loft the day before, and asked the audience, did that ever come out? Nobody said yes, so we left the stage wondering – had we finished it? A little later I went in the loft to search for the development box file found a disk with the finished source code.

Why was it largely based on *Magicland Dizzy*?

Andrew Oliver: Our strategy for success on the NES, where the market was largely North America, was to follow up *Fantastic Dizzy*, which had taken about 8 months to write and won *Graphics Adventure Game* of the Year – with quick, high quality smaller *Dizzy* games at a lower price. Obviously, it was much easier and faster to use the basis of existing *Dizzy* games that had never been seen the other side of the Atlantic than start new ones.

What was the NES like to code for compared to the 8-bit micros?

PO: We loved the NES. Its character mapped scrolling background and hardware sprites were brilliant for creating slick looking, fast flowing games. We'd come from pixel mapped screens that, whilst highly flexible, always resulted in slower moving games. It's programmed in 6502 which we'd learnt on the BBC micro and were already fluent in.

Why was it rejected for the *Excellent Dizzy Collection*?

AO: Sadly it was caught up in a difficult period of the industry's transition from computers games to consoles games. *Wonderland Dizzy* and several other games were to be sold for the NES in North America by Camerica, which had financial problems and eventually went bust. When they ran into trouble, we started converting all our NES games over to SEGA consoles which were more popular in Europe where Codemasters would be able to manufacture and publish them directly. However… sadly that didn't go to plan either, but the full details behind that are in the book.

CRYSTAL KINGDOM DIZZY 1992

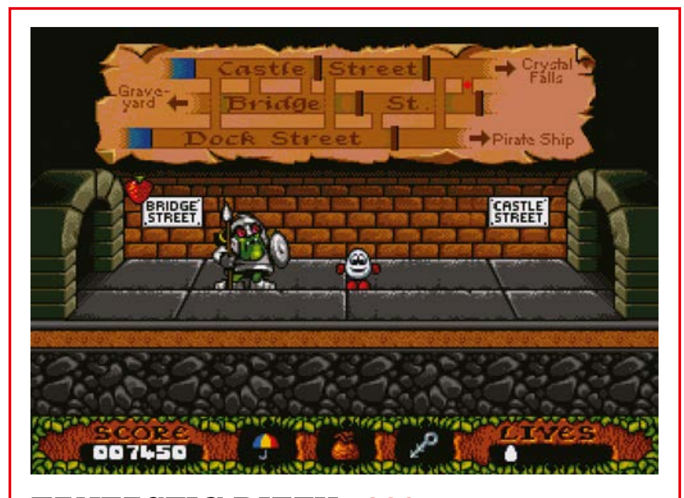
VARIOUS

■ *Crystal Kingdom Dizzy* marked another shift for the series, as it was the first adventure to be coded by Visual Impact. *Crystal Kingdom Dizzy* is also noticeable for numerous other reasons, not all of them good ones. It was not only the very last Dizzy adventure game to appear on the 8-bit consoles, but it was also the first to cost a whopping £9.99 (or £19.99 if you were an Amiga, Atari ST or MS DOS owner). This price point was far higher than the budget prices that earlier games had typically sold for and some critics reflected this in their scores. Bundled with a free poster and stickers, Codemasters' gamble paid off and it still shot to the top of various charts, keeping *Street Fighter II* from the coveted position. *Dizzy* clearly still had what it took.

In addition to having far superior visuals to the earlier games (the Amstrad's in particular are stunning), *Crystal Kingdom* also featured a completely different structure, with the adventure being set across four distinct worlds (passwords were available upon completing a stage so you could skip them later). While it was a refreshing change of direction for the series, it still featured the same familiar puzzles and gameplay, although the dialogue between characters isn't anywhere near as good as earlier games in the series.







FANTASTIC DIZZY 1993

VARIOUS

■ *The Fantastic Adventures Of Dizzy* was actually released on the NES in America in 1991 but we're choosing to focus on the later Mega Drive iteration, as it's the ultimate version of the game.

Unlike earlier *Dizzy* games, which took four to six weeks to complete, *Fantastic Dizzy* (as it's known in the UK) had an epic eight month development period. The brothers went all out with their first console game and added all sorts of cool features, including scrolling (previous games were flick-screen affairs) numerous minigames (two of which would go on to become *Bubble Dizzy* and *Dizzy Down The Rapids)*, cycling between night and day as well as 250 stars that had to be collected in order to rescue Daisy from the evil wizard Zak. Effortlessly capturing the cartoon style that the brothers had always envisioned when the idea for Dizzy first struck them, it's arguably the best game in the series and is only let down by the fact that it uses a weaker version of the inventory system (you can't choose which item to drop) and that you can't save while playing.

PANIC! DIZZY 1994

VARIOUS

Panic! Dizzy was part of *The Excellent Dizzy Collection*, a compilation of games that had a painfully protracted development period due to ongoing issues that the twins had with Codemasters.

Interestingly, *Panic! Dizzy* is no relation to *Panic Dizzy*, a poor puzzler that appeared on the 8-bit systems and saw Dizzy moving a conveyer belt to catch matching tiles (a second game, *Dizzy Panic*, appeared on the 16-bit systems a year later and added competitive play). Available on both the Master System and Game Gear (a planned Mega Drive version never materialised) *Panic! Dizzy* was three games in one, and very enjoyable they were too.

Shape Shifter featured a never ending wall of blocks that could only be cleared by matching four or more of the same tiles together, while *Dizzy Dice* was similarly themed but had you matching three dices together. The final game was *Picture Puzzler*, which saw you trying to solve a sliding puzzle of the cute Pogie. In a nice touch, different *Dizzy* characters could be selected, which would affect the game's difficulty.





WONDERLAND DIZZY 2015

NES

It's astonishing that *Wonderland Dizzy* has actually seen the light of day. Originally planned for the NES, it was then ported to Sega consoles as part of *The Excellent Dizzy Collection*, but was unceremoniously dropped when Codemasters decided it didn't want multiple adventures on the compilation. Seemingly forgotten, the twins found the original NES source code 22 years later while searching their loft and sent the code off to *Dizzy* fan Lukasz Kur, who delivered a working ROM image in a manner of days. It can now be played at **yolkfolk.com/sdg/**.

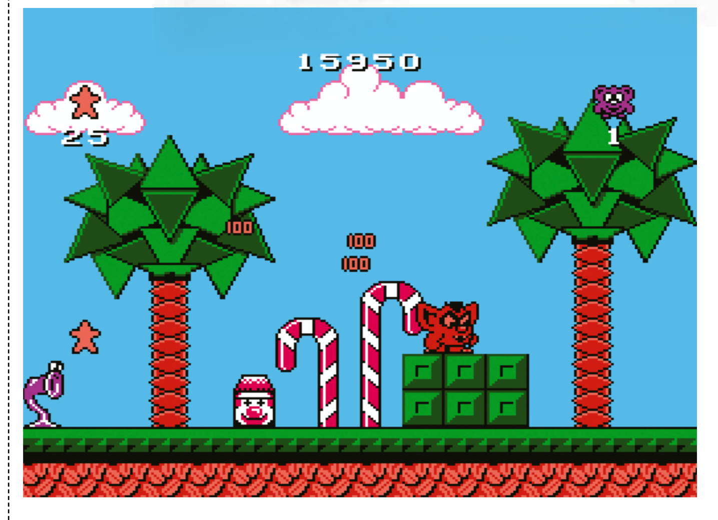
Based on *Magicland Dizzy*, *Wonderland Dizzy* has a number of key differences, including a stylish *Alice In Wonderland* theme. By far the biggest change, though is the ability to play as Dizzy or his girlfriend Daisy or play as both, with the player alternating between characters as lives are lost. Lukasz also added a Fun mode to the game, which essentially grants infinite lives.





LET'S GO DIZZY! THE STORY OF THE OLIVER TWINS

While Philip and Andrew Oliver will always be associated with *Dizzy*, they've actually created a huge number of games, including *Super Robin Hood*, *The Race Against Time* and the *Grand Prix Simulator* series. Keen to share their knowledge of the industry with others, they teamed up with Retro Fusion's Chris Wilkins and former *Crash* editor, Roger Kean to create the ultimate guide to their early years. It's a fascinating read full of interesting anecdotes about their early career and finally reveals the real reason why the brothers fell out over *Dizzy* and didn't speak to the Darlings for over a decade. Order it now from **fusionretrobooks.com**.



DREAMWORLD POGIE 2016

NES

Dreamworld Pogie is another forgotten gem from the twins that was recently rediscovered in Philip's loft (we wonder what other hidden relics are up there). Although Dizzy doesn't feature as the main character, new hero Pogie has cropped up in enough *Dizzy* games as an NPC that we feel the game is worth including here.

Clearly inspired by the likes of *Mario* and *Sonic*, *Dreamworld Pogie* is an admittedly generic (but polished) platformer that features all the usual traits you'd expect to find in the genre. Mushrooms can be bounced on, platforms systematically disappear and reappear and collecting 100 stars rewards you with an extra life. Pogie can even collect an item that makes him invincible for a short time, allowing him to plough through enemies.

Not content with finally releasing the game online for fans to play (play it at **www.dreamworldpogie.com/**) the twins teamed up with Chris Wilkins to deliver a Kickstarter that finished in January 2017. Backers will be able to buy a physical NES cartridge of the game with a percentage of proceeds going to charity, meaning they'll have a very desirable slice of gaming history.

THE LEGEND MAKER

THE MICRO MASTERCLASS

The BBC Micro educated scores of future games programmers and helped spark a computer revolution

TODAY, HAVING A COMPUTER IN THE HOUSE IS LARGELY TAKEN FOR GRANTED. Most of us have a laptop or desktop PC or Mac and children don't generally have to plead and beg their parents to buy them one. Not so back in the eighties. At that time, computers were still the shiny sheriffs of gadget town and kids typically had to use all of their cunning and might to persuade the powers that be in their household to get the chequebook out at the local computer store.

In a lot of cases, there was a simple utterance which seemed to do the trick: "Pleeeaaaase," the young voices would say. "I really need one to help with my school work and I'll be left behind in class if I don't get one." Yet some households remained sceptical. Those who didn't see the benefit of owning a computer figured those young minds weren't entirely interested in the more serious applications of computing and only really wanted something to play games on.

But then a machine arrived that would add much weight to the argument of Britain's youth: one that bore the name of the world's most respected broadcaster. When the BBC Micro was launched, suddenly computers had a veneer of respectability and parents became turned on to the prospect of computers and their ability to give their kids a leg up at school. In truth, it served in many cases to simply acquaint children with the delights of *Chuckie Egg* but there was no going back then.

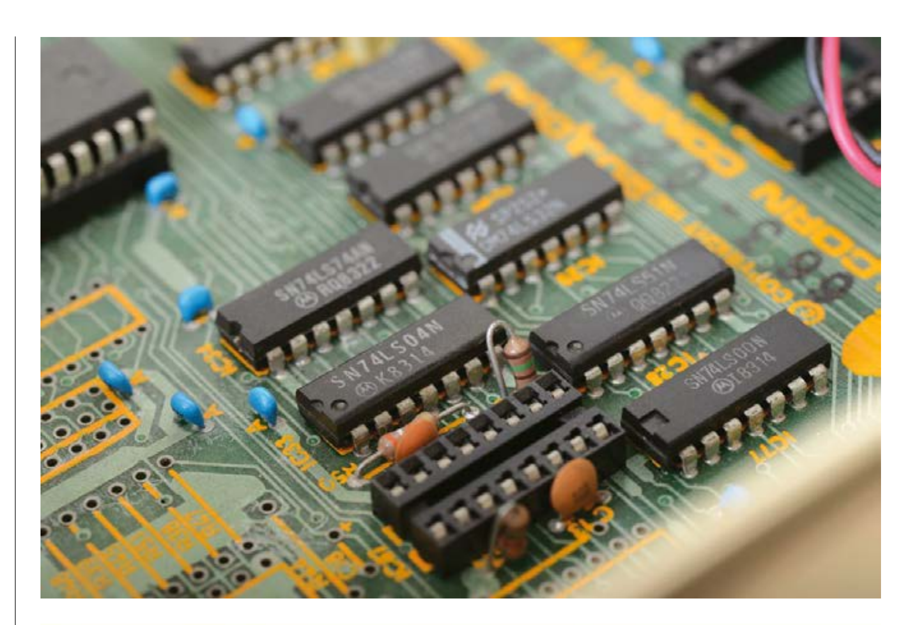
The BBC Micro was arguably the most important computer ever to be launched in the UK. Released on 1 December 1981, it was bought by schools up and down the country and it helped to kickstart a revolution. Scores of future games programmers honed their craft on the computer, from David Braben and Ian Bell who debuted *Elite* on the BBC Micro to Philip and Andrew Oliver who produced *Repton* for Superior Software. It led to numerous gaming exclusives including the side-scroller *Strykers Run*, *Magic Mushrooms*, *Beyond Infinity – Cute To Kill*, *Galaforce* and the *Asteroids* clone *Camouflage*.

Without it, the early days of games programming would have been so much poorer. In fact, who is to say how well some of the industry's earlier computers would have fared if the BBC Micro had never existed? There is an argument that the ZX Spectrum and the Commodore 64 wouldn't have proven as popular on UK shores had the BBC Micro not engrained itself so well into the public conscious. Those who couldn't stump up the cost of the Beeb's machine invariably sought those less expensive alternatives.

But why did the BBC decide to go out on a limb and enter this fledgling industry? "The broadcaster wanted a BBC-branded machine to base the television programmes around," begins Steve Furber, who joined Acorn Computers as a hardware designer in 1980.

The BBC Micro was indeed created to serve a very specific purpose: to complement the Beeb's Computer Literacy Project which not only sought to make the British public aware of microcomputers but teach children how to use them. The idea was to launch a book, a range of applications, a course in BASIC coding and, crucially, a ten-part BBC series called *The Computer Programme*, which it hoped to have on air in January 1982. The problem was, it was early 1981 and the BBC knew there wasn't enough time to make a computer all by itself. So those behind the project decided to challenge British computer manufacturers to come up with something suitable for them instead.

At the time, Acorn had been working on a computer called the Proton. Intended as the superior successor to Acorn's hugely successful Atom, it ended up being based on a design Furber had created during his PhD at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. "My earliest memory was sketching the very rough Proton circuit diagram around October 1980," he says. Furber hadn't





THE VIDEO PROCESSOR WAS THE MOST WORRYING. IT KEPT OVERHEATING



Steve Furber, pictured in the centre here, was instrumental in created the BBC Micro having produced a prototype computer provisionally called the Proton

FROM SMALL ACORNS, GAMES DID GROW

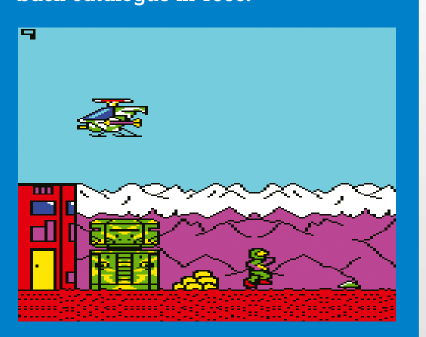
More than 1,200 games were created for the BBC Micro and a sizeable number were published by Acornsoft

■ **THE BBC MICRO was not meant to be a games machine. It had a mighty broadcaster's name behind it and it was going into schools. To that end, it was supposed to promote education, yet when Hermann Hauser, Chris Curry and David Johnson-Davies formed Acorn Computer's software house, Acornsoft, they allowed games to sit along the more serious applications they published.**

During its lifespan, the company enjoyed the status of being a top-three player on the BBC Micro along with Superior Software and Micro Power. Some of its games did find themselves in schools, although they tended to be of the educational variety such as the verb-finding 'classic' *Podd*. Many of the others, meanwhile, were played by children at home. Their parents presumably were sitting downstairs full of admiration that their offspring had taken so well to computing.

Many of Acornsoft's games were text adventures and clones and they ranged from *Hopper* to *Missile Base* to *Monsters* (based on *Frogger*, *Missile Command* and *Space Panic* respectively). *Snapper* was a clone of *Pac-Man* while *Super Invaders* stole *Space Invader's* thunder. But they were accurate conversions and created to a high quality.

David Braben certainly had no qualms letting Acornsoft publish *Elite* after Thorn EMI had turned the game down on the grounds that it needed to be simplified. Braben found Acornsoft to be a friendly, non-interfering bunch and *Elite* became the BBC Micro's finest game. The company also took on *Revs* by Geoff Crammond, helping the developer establish himself as a creator of amazing racing games. Superior Software bought Acornsoft's back catalogue in 1986.



progressed much further by the time Hermann Hauser and Steve Curry, who founded Acorn in December 1978, got wind of the BBC's plan.

Hauser spoke to the BBC to put his company forward as a contender to design and make the Beeb's new machine, even though he knew the Proton only existed in name as a dual-processor concept. His persuasive nature saw Acorn placed on the BBC's shortlist and arrangement's were made to visit the computer firm's Cambridge HQ that Friday. It was then that Hauser felt he had better let his team know what was going on. "He rang myself and [fellow engineer] Sophie Wilson to ask if we could have a processor available by the Friday," says Furber. "We both said 'no' but he told us both that the other had said 'yes'."

Fooled into getting a computer ready in just one week, the team got down to work. They decided to base it on the Proton, even though they only had their initial sketch and a draft specification from Hauser to go off. The Proton was to have a dual processor: that is, two 8-bit processors working together. It was also intended to have graphics and sound that would be good enough to head off any potential competition from Sinclair. "We filled out the details on what had been the Proton schematic on the Monday," says Furber. The BBC Micro was about to be born.

BUILDING THE BEEB

Furber enjoyed creating computers and he did it for fun. "I'd say hobby, but I was in aerodynamics and, as a PhD student, I was using the machines I built to write my thesis," he says. This, however, was something else. Not only was the development supposed to be completed in rapid time but the stakes had something of a personal flavour too because Curry and Hauser had worked at Sinclair Research and they wanted to prove they could beat their former employer. The two companies also saw the BBC's project as a big deal, since it not only offered great marketing potential but granted huge prestige for the winner.





■ Superior Software was one of the main publishers for the BBC Micro and it released games such as the platform puzzler *Citadel*



■ *Mr Ee!* was very much a copy of the arcade game *Mr Do* but it was a BBC Micro exclusive

Surprisingly, though, education wasn't first and foremost in Furber and Wilson's mind when they were creating the computer, despite the remit handed to them by the BBC. "The Acorn ideology was to build computers that we liked and then hope that customers would like them too so there was little educational ideology at the start for us," Furber says. Instead, they looked to create a prototype that would simply impress, not knowing what the competition was up to (we ask Furber if the team knew what Sinclair was planning? "No," he answers, firmly). Hauser was confident from the very beginning that they would pull it off.

But then he had assembled a talented team. Wilson, another Cambridge graduate, had been heavily involved in the Cambridge Microprocessor Society as a student. She had designed an electronic cow feeder for a farmer in Harrogate and she became a respected consultant. It was her work that had led to the production of the Acorn System one 8-bit computer that had morphed into the Atom. Producing a computer in a week, though, was something else. The team knew they had to get some outside help.

On the Tuesday, Ramanuj Banerjee from the Cambridge University Computer Lab was invited to join, his task being to wire up the prototype. This took him until the following day. "We called him the 'fastest wire-wrap gun in the West'," Furber jokes. Once that was complete, the team was able to debug the machine to make it work and they toiled until the Thursday evening, their intense mission to get the computing working properly leading to mild panic when it kept throwing up a fault.

THE BBC MICRO WENT ON TO SELL 1.5 MILLION UNITS OVER THE COURSE OF ITS LIFETIME

It turned out to be easy enough to resolve. Hauser suggested the in-circuit emulator cable be cut and to everyone's surprise, it did the trick. By 7am on the Friday, the team was satisfied with their prototype and it was ready to be shown to the BBC team at 10am. As they arrived, they were taken to Curry's office for a talk before being allowed to see the prototype in all of its glory. They were very much taken aback.

LOOKING GOOD

To ensure the machine looked its best, Acorn had asked for a case to be made. "The casing was designed by Alan Boothroyd," Furber says. This was

■ The BBC Micro's case was made with ten user-programmable keys as well as a full Qwerty keyboard



Cosmic Camouflage was released as a sequel to Acornsoft's *Meteors*



Elite is seen as one of the best games of all time and it had a huge impact when it was released on the BBC Micro



Created by Nick Pelling, the fixed shooter *Arcadians* was a riff on the Namco arcade game *Galaxian*

important because Acorn wanted to display the product in as complete a state as possible so that the BBC could get a better feel for it. Boothroyd looked to make the computer stand out so he created some red keyboard buttons. It was an eye-catching touch. "Sophie had also spent the week building the programming language, BBC BASIC, with strong inputs from the BBC's specification," Furber says.

The language was ready for the BBC crew to see that Friday morning along with some apps. By the afternoon, Wilson had got it to run black and white Mode 0 graphics in a resolution of 640x256. Duly impressed, the BBC promptly awarded Acorn the contract, allowing Hauser and Curry's company to beat the likes of Sinclair Research, Newbury Laboratories, Tangerine Computer Systems and Dragon Data. Even though the BBC had known all along that Acorn did not have a prototype when it spoke to Curry on the phone, it was impressed by the amount of work completed in such a short space of time. Yet it was only the start. With the agreement in place, the real work would now begin to create a fully fledged computer that would be rolled out to schools and shops a year later.

GETTING TECHNICAL

Acorn worked with the BBC on a final specification for the machine. "There were a lot of discussions about the software, and in particular the spec of BBC BASIC, but less about the hardware," says Furber. Even so, Acorn convinced the BBC not to go with the Z80 chip and opt for the 6502 instead. A 1Mhz 6502 processor been used in the Atom, and Acorn felt it was the best option. For the BBC Micro, though, a faster version was used.

"We went with a 2MHz 6502 processor and 4MHz main memory multiplexed between processor and graphics," says Furber. With that nailed down, there was a fair bit of fiddling with what are called Uncommitted Logic Arrays (ULA). These allow a number of logic gates to be configured to implement a bespoke function on a single chip. By using them, the chip count could be lowered, saving money on the computer's production.

"We'd decided to reduce the number of chips by using the ULA in a couple of functions, a serial processor and a video processor, which took the chip numbers down by 10 or 20," says Furber. A lot of effort went into cleaning up the schematics too. "We also got the circuit board PCB inside," he adds. But it wasn't all about practicalities and expense. "The design didn't really pull tricks, but we pushed the performance – the 4MHz memory was the first at that speed, and things were a bit close to the edge. We mostly got away with it," Furber explains. While this work was being carried out, Paul Bond led a team working on the operating system – known as Acorn MOS, which included support for four channel sound and graphics – and the exterior was also being tweaked. The BBC had wanted a set of ten user-programmable keys in addition to a full-Qwerty keyboard and so the team got to work and these were soon added.



The BBC Micro was not marketing as a gaming machine and instead aimed to be a serious computer.

WE WERE VERY LUCKY THAT MOST OF THE TIME THE MICRO WAS VERY RELIABLE



There were a good number of exclusive games for the BBC Micro, among them *Imogen* which was published by Micro Power.

Beeb bosses also asked for a default graphics mode based on a Teletext display, which became known as Mode 7, but a few niggles emerged. "The video processor was the most worrying," Furber says. "It kept overheating." A large heat sink helped to take care of that but there were other issues that followed.

"The 6502 databus was also pretty horribly overloaded and the early prototypes would only run reliably if we placed one of our fingers across the PCB tracks," Furber says. "In the production machine, we had a resistor pack to do this job. We never really understood why it helped but it seemed to work."

Power supply issues also dogged production too. "Initially the BBC insisted on a linear supply but that was never going to go well with the small space in the box and the poor efficiency of linear supplies," Furber explains. "After a few had caught fire, the BBC eventually relented and we got a switched-mode supply put together very quickly by Aztec in Hong Kong. That fixed the problem permanently."

The final result was a Model A computer costing £235 with a 6502A processor, 2MHz speed, 16KB RAM – expandable to 32KB – 32K ROM, three channel sound and a tape recorder. Another version – the Model B – was also launched. This one would cost an extra £100 but it had 32KB of RAM, which was expandable to 64K, a 5.25-inch floppy drive and software that could run the disk operating system CP/M. But did it sell? It sure did.

ON THE SHELVES

The BBC envisioned selling around 12,000 computers, while Wilson and Furber believed that it was more than

FILMING THE COMPUTER REVOLUTION

How the BBC threw its broadcasting might behind the BBC Micro

■ **CHRISTOPHER EVANS NEVER did see the widespread adoption of computers in the 1980s. He may have written a book called *The Mighty Micro: The Impact Of The Computer Revolution* before scripting and presenting a six-part television show of the same name for ITV, but he sadly died in 1979. The programmes weren't aired until 1981 so he didn't get to view himself on television either. But his contribution to computing was nevertheless huge.**

The BBC was inspired by the success of his programme, leading it to come up with the idea of a series of its own. That, as we discuss on these pages, directly led to the creation of the BBC Micro but what was the show like? Well, it was called, perhaps uninspiringly, *The Computer Programme*, it aired on BBC 2 on 11 January, running for ten weeks until 15 March. Each 25 minute episode was presented by Chris Serle and Ian McNaught-Davis – who, perhaps prophetically, was called Mac. They took viewers through the serious side of computers, explaining how they worked and how they could be programmed.

At that time, gaming was seen as a frivolous sideline even though it was the media that turned most children on to computing. Still, the programmes that were introduced by a flying owl – the BBC Micro's symbol – were popular enough and they spawned two follow-ups: *Making The Most Of The Micro* which aired in 1983 and *Micro Live* which ran between 1984 and 1987. It would be a further five years before UK gamers would be blessed with a show of their own, though: Channel 4's iconic *GamesMaster*.







good enough to sell around 50,000 computers. Yet even though the price of the BBC Micro was higher than Acorn had wanted – "It was expensive to make, so we had to give it a higher price," says Furber – it went on to sell 1.5 million units over its lifetime. The computer was able to retain its popularity because of its expandable nature, which ensured that it could be tailored to suit the growing demands of its users.

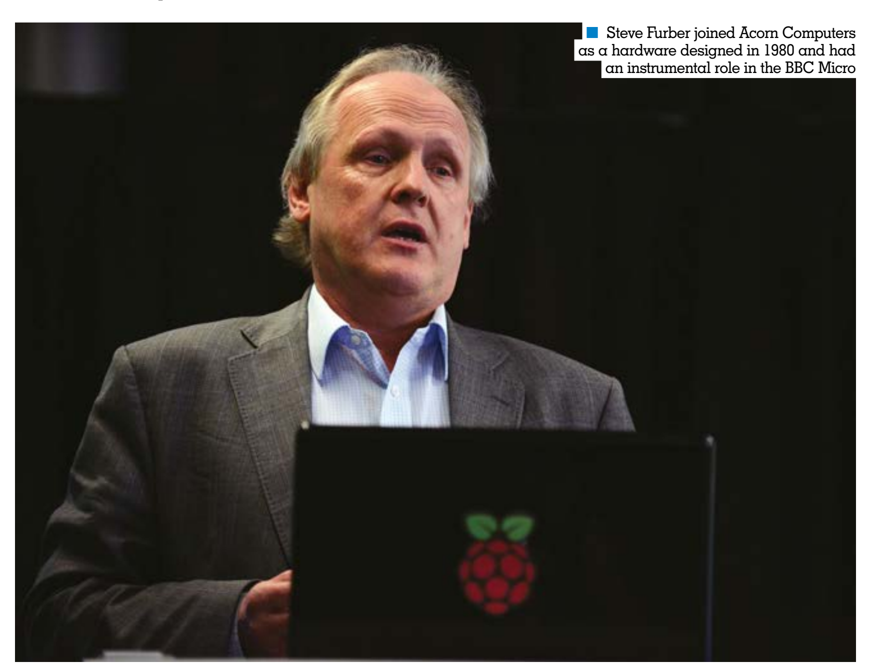
In that sense, the Micro was an ongoing pioneer that was bringing fresh ideas to the table all the time, such as a Motorola 68B54 networking controller that enabled multiple Micros to be linked together. "The Econet local area network was prototyped on the Atom and it was an obvious inclusion on the BBC Micro, even though the rest of the market hadn't heard of networks at that time," Furber explains.

By March 1983, *BBC Micro User* magazine was reporting sales across Europe, with production hitting 11,000 a month. There was a major sales drive in the USA too, although the primary market was always the UK, with the States having taken to the Apple II in far greater numbers (Apple II was released in 1977, giving it a time advantage).

"There was a lot to be said for the BBC Micro," says Furber. "There were the technical things: the expandability, the native performance, BBC BASIC, the hammering that the keyboard could withstand without complaint. But there was also the BBC brand with it, which was and still is very trusted and well-respected."

Eventually, though, the BBC Micro ran out of steam. There were updates, among them the more expensive Master 128 and Master Compact that increased the amount of available RAM and promised backwards compatibility, but 16-bit computers such as the Amiga and Atari ST were dominating the home market and consoles were taking over the gaming space.

Acorn discontinued the BBC Micro in 1994 but its a testament to their design that so many continue to be used today.



■ Steve Furber joined Acorn Computers as a hardware designed in 1980 and had an instrumental role in the BBC Micro



“ I got to know Chris at Cavedog. At the time, he was hard at work on what would become *Total Annihilation*. Then when he started Gas Powered Games, he asked if I might be willing to come in and help with the story. One of the things I always loved and respected about him was that he's a hardcore tech head. He's always about advancing the technology under the hood, as well as making the game fun to play. ”

Neal Hallford [story, *Dungeon Siege*]





INTERVIEW
CHRIS TAYLOR

The famous designer of iconic strategy games such as Total Annihilation and Supreme Commander takes us through his entire career

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Total Annihilation (1997)
Designer and Coder



Dungeon Siege (2002)
Designer and Project Leader



Supreme Commander (2007)
Lead Designer and Creative Director

AS A CHILD growing up in the seventies, what was your first experience of videogames?

I was born in Surrey, British Columbia and lived in a town called Guildford. In the Guildford shopping mall was an arcade called The Circuit Circus, and it was there I spent many an afternoon playing *Asteroids* and *Space Invaders*. My mom loved to buy us all the latest gadgets and bought us a Sears Pong and, shortly afterwards, a Mattel Intellivision. Unsurprisingly, one of my favourite games from that era is Don Daglow's *Utopia*, but those arcade games also inspired me. I recently purchased a full-sized *Asteroids* machine together with the service manual and schematic. It's still capturing my imagination today!

What about home computing?

My dad surprised me in the fall of 1980 with a TRS-80, and my journey, aged 14, truly began in earnest right at that moment. Back then the designers were programmers, and they really understood the hardware they were working on, and knew if they could move stuff around quickly and smoothly, the game would be more engaging. But in terms of my own career, I didn't really hit my stride until I was 21 and I got my first professional job making games.

That was with Distinctive Software?

Yep. I Joined them in the May of 1988 after seeing an ad in the newspaper for an assembly language programming position. I didn't even realise it was for a videogame company until I showed up at the interview and they told me it was to program videogames. I nearly lost my mind! Winning the lottery would have been less exciting than this incredible and fortuitous event.

Your first game was a sequel to the popular baseball sim *Hardball*.

Honestly, and it pains me to say it, I was not, and am still not, a big fan of baseball. But back in those days there was only one primary programmer/designer on each title, and I was fortunate to have access to a set of very well-designed and optimised libraries. That made the job much easier, and I was able to create *Hardball 2* in about 20 months. I think it turned out pretty good, but it perhaps could have been better had I actually had an appreciation for the sport.

> **MY MOM LOVED TO BUY THE LATEST GADGETS AND BOUGHT US A SEARS PONG**

What else did you work on at Distinctive and what was it like working there?

I helped out on a game called *Test Drive 2* during *Hardball 2*, and then partnered up with Jay McDonald on a game called *4D Boxing*, which if I'm not mistaken, was one of the first games to use motion capture. That was interesting. Ultimately we had to 'hand tweak' so much of the data that we might have been better off just animating it all. In the end it worked

out pretty well though, before I worked on two more baseball titles, *Triple Play Baseball* and *Virtua Stadium Baseball*. Yes, you can imagine, too many baseball games and I decided it was time to leave the company. But working at Distinctive was incredibly awesome in every way; it was paradise. Through accident or fate I found the only place in British Columbia that was doing work like this. We worked almost all of the time, weekends and evenings included. Guys slept under their desks. Takeaway pizza or lasagne almost every night. We were just crazy about making games.

You're a self-admitted 'spaceships and robots' guy, which no doubt influenced creating the renowned *RTS Total Annihilation*.

I was considering starting my own company, but was persuaded by Shelley Day and Ron Gilbert to join them at Humongous Entertainment. I was a huge fan of Westwood's *Dune 2* and wanted to expand upon its template; I had my own vision for how this should work, which was fundamentally based around real physics coupled with a sci-fi plot. I also knew 3D was the future of games, and kept thinking about the king and queen in chess, which led to combining them into the Commander unit. Mixed with my desire for mass over-the-top battles and a key strategy of controlling the high ground, this was the vision, and it was hair on fire for the first 20 months – I think with the exception of Christmas holidays in 1996, we more or less lived in the office!

Despite the success of *Total Annihilation*, you left Humungous/Cavedog after the release of its Core Contingency add-on. Why was that?

I think I caught the fever to operate my own development company when I had first walked into Distinctive years before. I loved the idea that I could be in control of all the variables, and set the tone for the company's culture. I have a rebellious personality, so I work better when I'm in control of my own destiny. And for the most part it worked out pretty well. Unfortunately this meant that by necessity my role soon moved away from programming and mainly into design. The job of running the studio was just too big, and I wanted control, so I made the sacrifice to give up programming.

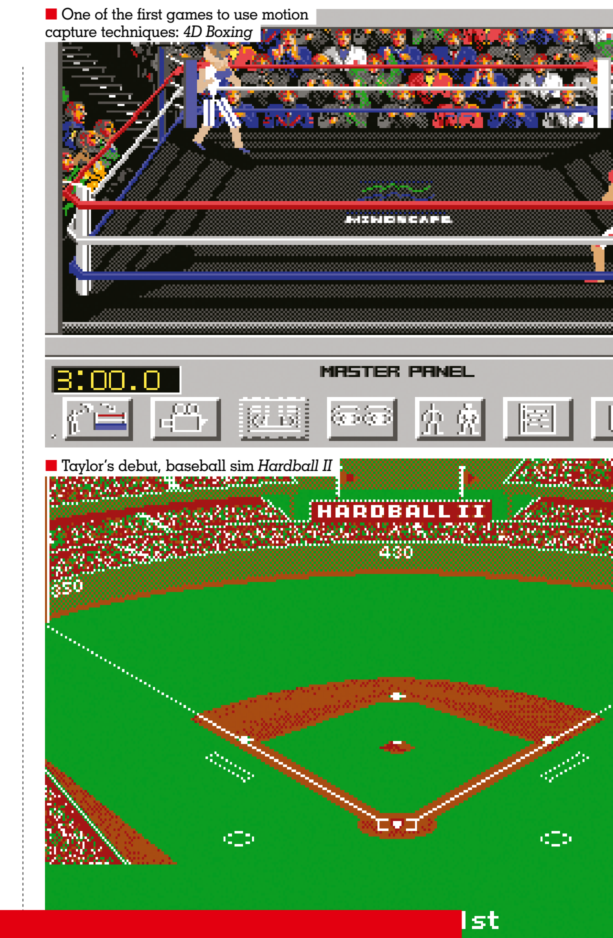
Gas Powered Games's first title was the legendary *Dungeon Siege*, which was published by Microsoft.

We talked to a lot of publishers back then, but ultimately I decided to go with Microsoft because of Ed Fries – I was impressed by his passion for gaming, and he also had great vision for where he wanted to take the games division. He had recently signed Chris Roberts studio Digital Anvil, so I could see them building up a lot of momentum in PC gaming. And they were local! But *Dungeon Siege* was our first title and it was a long haul – over four years in total.

What drew you towards the RPG genre with *Dungeon Siege*?

Diablo. I loved that game, but found it had so many quirks such as the long loading times. So I wanted to create something that would fully immerse the player into its world. I also wanted an RPG you could simply pick up and play without researching character classes for days.

The technological side was important too. It was node-based technology – meaning that the entire world was built out of building blocks that would all fit together, which meant no loading screens and transitions. We ran into all kinds of crazy problems with it, but in the end we got it all sorted out.



■ One of the first games to use motion capture techniques: *4D Boxing*

■ Taylor's debut, baseball sim *Hardball II*

RIGHT FROM THE START, SUPCOM WAS THE SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR TO TOTAL ANNIHILATION



■ *Command & Conquer* may have taken most of the plaudits (and sales), but there's little doubting Taylor's *Total Annihilation* was more impressive experience

Solid sales presumably meant a sequel was inevitable?

Yes, and *Dungeon Siege 2* was a much harder story to tell, because back then sequels were always bigger, better and more expensive – not a good recipe for success! We battled with the scope and scale of the game and ultimately went over budget and over deadline. We wanted to do all the things we didn't have time or money for on the first game, but lost our way on features and made it much more complicated than it needed to be.

To many fans, your finest hour is your next game, *Supreme Commander*.

Right from the start, *SupCom* was the spiritual successor to *Total Annihilation*. The foundation of the game design was that you could fight

Taking place 25 years after the original, *Supreme Commander 2* overhauled and upgraded many of its aspects

> Basically, I met Chris Taylor at GDC in 1996 and he recruited me to work on the team. As soon as he showed me the initial stuff, I knew it was gonna be great. I turned down several other offers to take the job.
>
> Jon Mavor (lead artist, *Total Annihilation*)

these *massive* battles on enormous maps, with a zillion units. I came up with the idea for strategic zoom and it fit right in with my design vision, and when I was able to secure the name *Supreme Commander* I was like, 'Oh my God, this is perfect'. It sold about 1 million units back then and, like *TA*, *Dungeon Siege* and *SupCom 2*, many more on Steam since then.

After *Supreme Commander*, Gas Powered expanded significantly before a turbulent period resulted in a takeover by Wargaming.net. What's your take on this time?

In the summer of 2012, we had three different projects under development, and in the space of a few months they were all cancelled for various reasons. This left us in a tough spot and we went through many rounds of layoffs as we trimmed down to a core of about 30 people. This was still too many people to fund a Kickstarter, but we still gave it a shot, asking to raise a little over 1 million dollars for a game called *Wildman*. We actually needed a lot more than that, so when the campaign was starting to show that we would either fail to raise the money, or barely hit our goal, I knew we would need to sell the company or close it down. When Wargaming approached us, we realised that this was the better path, as there was a good chance of failure even if we reached our funding goal – which was in itself very unlikely. Looking back, I still believe this was the right decision.

You've recently left Wargaming. What are you up to today?

I am in the early stages of starting a new company. At the heart of this new venture will be a game that I'll design myself and build on a technology platform that I develop simultaneously. I'm not one to do things the easy way, but that's what makes it exciting.

Having been involved with games for almost 30 years, what's the period you look back at most fondly, and your favourite game?

Oh, my time at Distinctive because everything was so new, and I was learning so much every single day. That's the key to it all, and enjoying what you do, when you can learn and grow, and really feel it at the end of each day.

As to a favourite game, that's a difficult question. I think I'd have to choose *Total Annihilation*, although I believe *Supreme Commander* was actually the better game. Plus, we accomplished such a great technical feat – for its day – on *Dungeon Siege* by introducing the no-loading screens tech, so I think it deserves an honourable mention.

Any regrets?

Well I have a long list of things I would have done differently! But there's not much point in thinking about it now. What I am doing, as I head back out into the wild to start a new company, is taking those lessons and making sure I don't repeat the same mistakes again. That's really the key to it.



The Oregon Trail is one of the most successful videogames in the world, reportedly selling over 65 million copies since its debut in 1971.

GAME CHANGERS

THE OREGON TRAIL

Released: 1985 **Publisher:** MECC **Developer:** In-house **System:** Apple II

We brave the long frontier journey to remind ourselves how this educational game introduced us the power of choice and consequence in gaming

THOSE THAT were lucky enough to have travelled through the American educational system in the Eighties will no doubt be intimately familiar with the horrors discovered on *The Oregon Trail*. You know, *haunted*, by the long and winding road between Independence, Missouri and Oregon's own Willamette Valley. It's a treacherous 3,500-kilometre slog, where weary migrants are cast out, forced to battle blizzards, droughts, treacherous rivers, disease and famine; made to manage the deteriorating health of a small caravan of travellers and keep stock of an ever-dwindling pack of supplies from the back of a covered wagon. All in the name of *freedom*; maybe, the game doesn't really get into specifics. There is but one thing you can be certain of out there: if the stress doesn't kill you, the dysentery certainly will.

The Oregon Trail was designed as an educational tool for aspiring history students, although it became legendary because of its unwavering difficultly, uncanny ability to spawn countless memes and inventive retelling of the famous struggle of settlers moving between the gateway of the American West to the fertile lands of Willamette Valley. The premise itself is ripped straight from an seventh-grade history book, as teacher Don Rawitsch – along with his two friends Bill Heinemann and Paul Dillenberger – sought to give young students history lessons using the emerging new technology of the time.

The result was *The Oregon Trail* – part Choose Your Own Adventure book and part resource management simulation. With limited graphics, this text-based adventure was basic enough that it could easily run on everything from the Apple II to an HP 2100 minicomputer, and was therefore easily adoptable by high schools up and down the nation. Rawitsch may

BEST SPIN-OFFS

THE BEST ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS OF THIS GAMING CLASSIC



THE OREGON TRAIL

★ Gameloft ported *The Oregon Trail* to iOS in 2011 and what a wonderful update it was. Not only does it fix many of the bugs, it also offers new wagons, refined gameplay and a suite of changes to refine the game for the modern era without losing what made it special.



THE ORGAN TRAIL

★ What if – hold on, hear us out – instead of trying to make it to Oregon you were trying to survive a zombie apocalypse? Yeah, that's the *Organ Trail*, a retro-inspired adventure which takes the basic design of the classic game and slaps a zombie theme on top of it.



ORION TRAIL

★ If travelling the mid-west doesn't interest you, perhaps the *Orion Trail* will. Taking the adventure from a road, off into the stars, mixing well-oiled *The Oregon Trail* with *Star Trek*. A Kickstarter success story, it has a little more going on than the original.

have intended the game to act as an interactive history lesson – with historical probability and century old first-hand accounts used to dictate the events that transpire at locations along the way – but it warped into something far more compelling.

From the outset, *The Oregon Trail* forces you to make some tough decisions. Party leaders pick a former profession, functioning essentially as a difficulty level – not that the game would dare communicate such an obvious option with any clarity. It gives you the opportunity to name your pioneers; a novel feature, but one that ultimately brings some much needed humanity to your party, making the eventual trials and tribulations all too real – *XCOM* players will know this pain all too well. You'll purchase supplies using rudimentary mathematics to stock your wagon, before deciding when to embark on the treacherous journey. This is your first real test: leave too late in the year and you might find your journey complicated by one of Oregon's famous snowstorms, leave too early and any other number of misfortunes will await you. Honestly, *The Oregon Trail* teaches you so much, aside from the reasons anybody would be foolhardy enough to venture on such a ridiculous and painstaking adventure.

As a learning tool, *The Oregon Trail* is brutal. It quickly teaches you to celebrate the smallest of victories – such as fording a river without drowning a buddy or making it to a settlement without a party member becoming struck down with a cholera – because everything can warp all too quickly into the biggest of disasters. You are taught to quickly manage money and resources, attempting to mitigate hunger and exhaustion against a desire to prepare for the future; one wrong decision can see to the untimely death of a passenger or the loss of supplies or all-important Oxen required to pull your wagon. *The Oregon Trial* pits you against nature in a desperate gamble for survival but, and here's the thing, nature almost always wins in the end.

IF THE STRESS DOESN'T KILL YOU, THE DYSENTERY CERTAINLY WILL

KEY FACTS

- *The Oregon Trail* is largely considered to be one of the greatest video games of all time, thanks in part to its accessibility to much of the American public. While challenging, its basic design is fairly rudimentary, ensuring everybody could play and enjoy.
- Developed by just one student teacher, *The Oregon Trail* would prove to be one of the most successful games of all time. Its uptake in the American educational system was unprecedented, thanks in part to its simple graphics and gameplay systems.

■■■ No matter what you do, you'll need to accept that either the condition of your wagon, the health of your party or your stock of supplies will dwindle. Potentially game-ending seasonal weather conditions are always on the mind, ramping up player anxiety, especially as wrong turns, river crossings and random events can cause delay to your journey. And so you will feel implored to pick up the pace, to push to make up lost time and get ahead of disaster; strength begins to fall, sickness begins to spread and starvation leads to death. One bad decision – no matter how good the intention behind it – can cause a world of suffering, what a lesson to teach the youth of yesteryear.

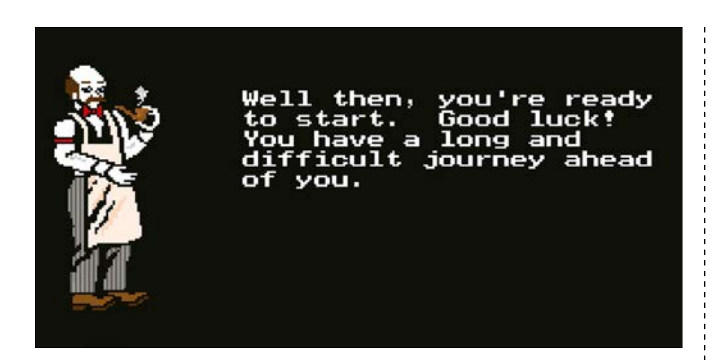
The Oregon Trail paved the way for educational games around the world and its impact on students in the US over three decades can't really be understood. While it looks a little silly by today's standards – what with kids having their learning augmented through the likes of *Minecraft* – at the time it was fairly revolutionary. The game has, of course, stood the test of time, spawning multiple spin-offs, spiritual successors and has been ported to just about every device you can imagine. But there's a simple beauty to be found in the earliest versions of *The Oregon Trail*; it's a simple adventure that challenges you in ways conventional modern games do not, and it's well worth partaking in should you get the chance.



GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT LIFE LESSONS LEARNED ON THE OREGON TRAIL

IT WAS INTENDED TO TEACH US ABOUT HISTORY, BUT WHAT ELSE CAN YOU LEARN FROM THIS FRONTIER SIM?



RUDIMENTARY MATHS

■ If you have any hope of making it through this gruelling journey in one piece, you'll need to ensure that you keep your wagon stocked with essential supplies. But it isn't enough to stock it up ahead of the journey – as many will be lost along the way – and so you'll need to weigh up your load and basic requirements, keeping enough cash on you as a reserve for later in your travels.



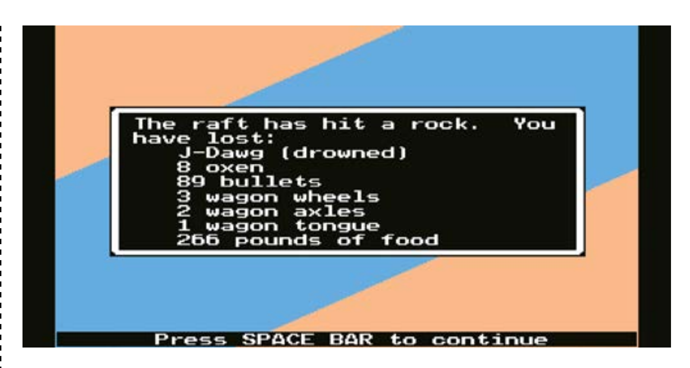
MANAGING LOSS

■ These settlers may indeed be looking for a better life but, sadly, nothing in this life is that easy. *The Oregon Trail* has you name your caravan of travellers ahead of setting out, making the inevitable death of your friends all the harder to deal with. *XCOM* players will know the effectiveness of such a simple tactic all too well, and as your party begins contracting diseases and dying off, the stakes will only be raised as you creep closer to Oregon.



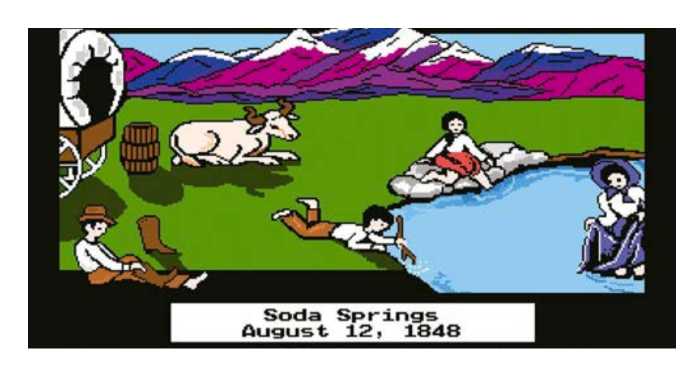
READING MAPS

■ Reading maps is no easy feat, but this game has you doing it anyway. While much of the path is restricted to one direction, *The Oregon Trail* will often offer you the choice of which road you wish to travel and which rivers you wish to cross, and only by assessing the map will you begin to have an understanding of the terrain and pitfalls to each. Mistakes will be made, of course, and you'll always pay the price.



DON'T CROSS RIVERS

■ Water may cover the majority of the Earth, but it's also one of our biggest enemies – rivers, for example, can be deceptively deep, concealing a powerful tide. It's all too easy to lose supplies or companions, and that's why *The Oregon Trail* teaches one important lesson early: never Ford the river. While attempting to wade through the waters can shave time off your journey, it's often a dangerous task that will inflict great loss.



IMPORTANCE OF RESTING

■ The quickest way to your destination? Well, it's obviously setting the fastest moving pace imaginable and booking it there without looking back, right? Wrong! *The Oregon Trail* never makes this implicitly clear, but taking regular breaks and micro-managing the pace of your group can keep your party in good health, your supplies stocked and helps to keep your caravan out of disrepair. Sadly, you tend to learn this one the hard way.



BE WEARY OF DISEASE

■ *The Oregon Trail* has no qualms in striking your party down with ailments and so you'll quickly need to learn how to deal with disease. Cholera, typhoid and, yes, dysentery, are just some of the delights that await you here. Ensuring you have enough supplies – in particular food stocks – rest regularly and don't spend too much time off in the wrong direction can all be lifesavers out on the brutal Oregon trail.



MEETING THE LOCALS

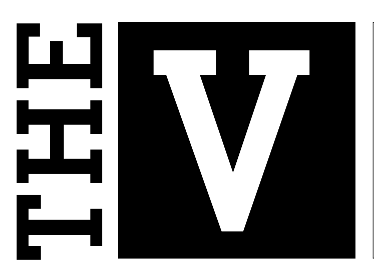
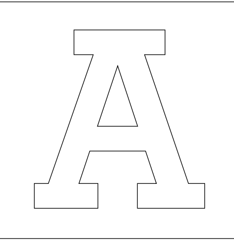
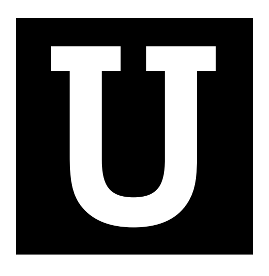
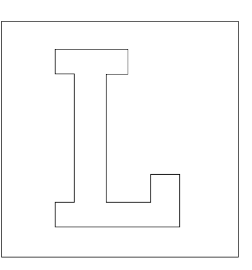
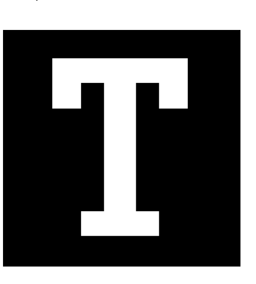
■ While it can be scary to meet new people, it's actually one of the best ways to help make any journey a success. Making regular stops in historic locations will give you the opportunity to chat to locals – getting advice on the local terrain – and will even give you opportunities to trade with other travellers. This is integral, especially when supplies begin to dwindle, as they inevitably seem to on every trip.



BE RESOURCEFUL

■ Even if you're lucky enough to have a solid amount of money with you throughout your traversal of the trail, it's well worth considering the importance of leaning on your own resourcefulness. Setting food rations is a good start, as to is resting the caravan up and going hunting; is it sad to see so many animals die by your hand, of course, but then a little hunting in the eighteen hundreds would often have been the difference between life and death.

TOYS | PERIPHERALS | APPAREL | GADGETS | BOOKS

THE     

LOGITECH G533 WIRELESS HEADSET

MANUFACTURER: **LOGITECH** PRICE: **£120**

LOGITECH'S LATEST ENTRY into the gaming sphere is a carefully considered one. The moment you switch the G533s on you'll realise they've been carefully crafted – unlike many gaming headsets, they don't light up like an alien spaceship, they don't double as headphones for your smartphone, and they don't feel at all cheap.

The G533s are uncompromisingly for PC gaming. There's no 3.5mm jack for wired connections, and you'll need the wireless dongle plugged into your PC to get them working. And once you've connected them, the customisation options are outstanding. A dedicated app lets you tweak pretty much every setting you could want – you can adjust the feedback of your own voice when speaking into the microphone, change the function of the headset's only button, switch off beeps when you adjust the volume, and even tweak the individual 'speakers' that make up the headset's simulated 7.1 surround sound.

The surround sound is excellent, too, giving you a huge edge when gaming. If you've used a surround sound setup before you'll know just how much extra information it can give you when playing, often helping you get the drop on enemies behind or beside you before they know you're there. Here, it works just as well.

The only thing the headphones don't excel at is music, but that's not what they're for. This is a gaming headset through and through, and while it's expensive, you really do get what you pay for.

www.logitech.co.uk

VERDICT 9/10

The headphones last around 15 hours on a full charge, and the battery is user-replaceable if that starts to decrease after extended use.

The microphone has a built-in pop filter, which does a good job of reducing the punchiness of 'p's and 'b's when speaking, but doesn't otherwise muffle the audio.

This dial on the side allows for on-the-fly volume adjustment. It's large and easy to find, which is essential when in the middle of a game.

GAMING CLOTHING



THE SHADOW

Are you a Reaper main? Prepare to shout, "DIE, DIE, DIE!" as you pull on this stylish, street-art style shirt, which represents the shotgun-wielding mercenary perfectly. Actually, probably don't shout that.
www.gametee.co.uk



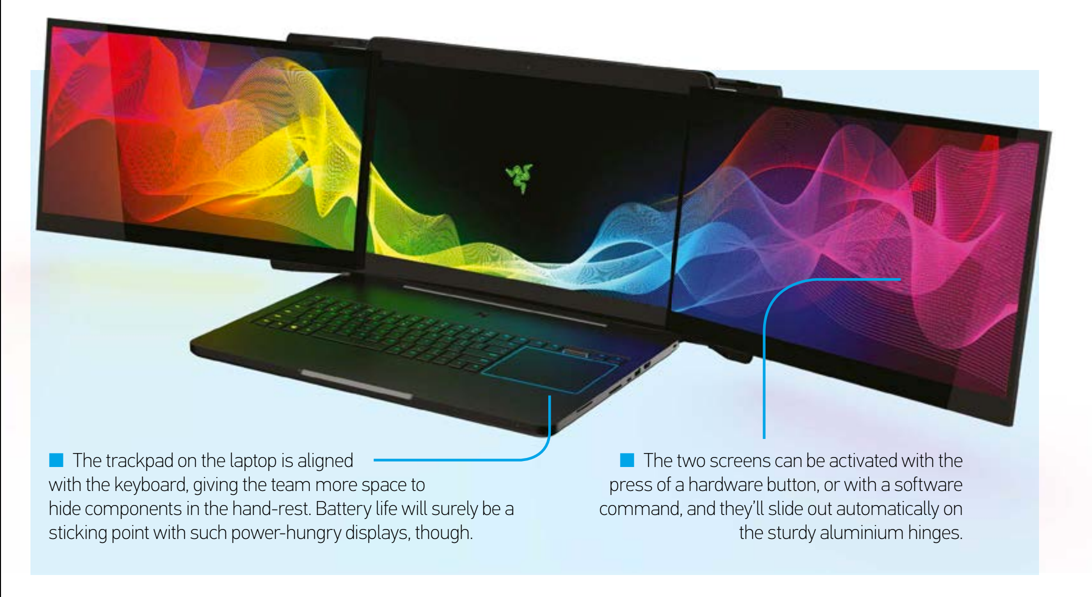
LEGENDARY QUOTES HOODIE

Why not celebrate the release of the new *Zelda* game with this stylish hoodie? It's packed with *Zelda*-related phrases, from 'Navi' and 'Rupees' to classics like, "It's dangerous to go alone, take this," and, er, 'HYAH!!!'
www.teefury.com



DISGUISE

If, like us, you've been obsessed with *Pokémon Sun & Moon*'s new creatures, this is sure to appeal to you. Dress up as Mimikyu, the Pokémon that loves Pikachu so much it wears a disguise to look like it.
www.teefury.com



■ The trackpad on the laptop is aligned with the keyboard, giving the team more space to hide components in the hand-rest. Battery life will surely be a sticking point with such power-hungry displays, though.

■ The two screens can be activated with the press of a hardware button, or with a software command, and they'll slide out automatically on the sturdy aluminium hinges.

RAZER PROJECT VALERIE

SOLD BY: **RAZER** PRICE: **£TBC**

RAZER HAS LED the field when it comes to gaming laptops in recent years, and at CES 2017 it showed off a concept that proves the company is always looking at what comes next. Project Valerie is a concept that offers a three-screen setup from a powerful gaming laptop, giving gamers a full experience, even on the move. The two screens slide out of the lid of the laptop using an automated system, so with the press of a button you'll be able to summon to extra displays and get surround-view gaming. Each is also (somehow) a 17.3-inch 4K display, giving you an incredible 12K view of your game. It's all powered by the Nvidia GeForce GTX 1080 GPU, which will surely be pushed to its limit with the three displays running at 4K.

Despite all of these complex contents, Razer has still said that Project Valerie will be comparable in thickness to other 17-inch gaming laptops. While those dedicate space to the internals, the majority of the bulk here comes from the screens. If Razer can pull this off, we may have a new leading product in laptop gaming.
www.razerzone.com

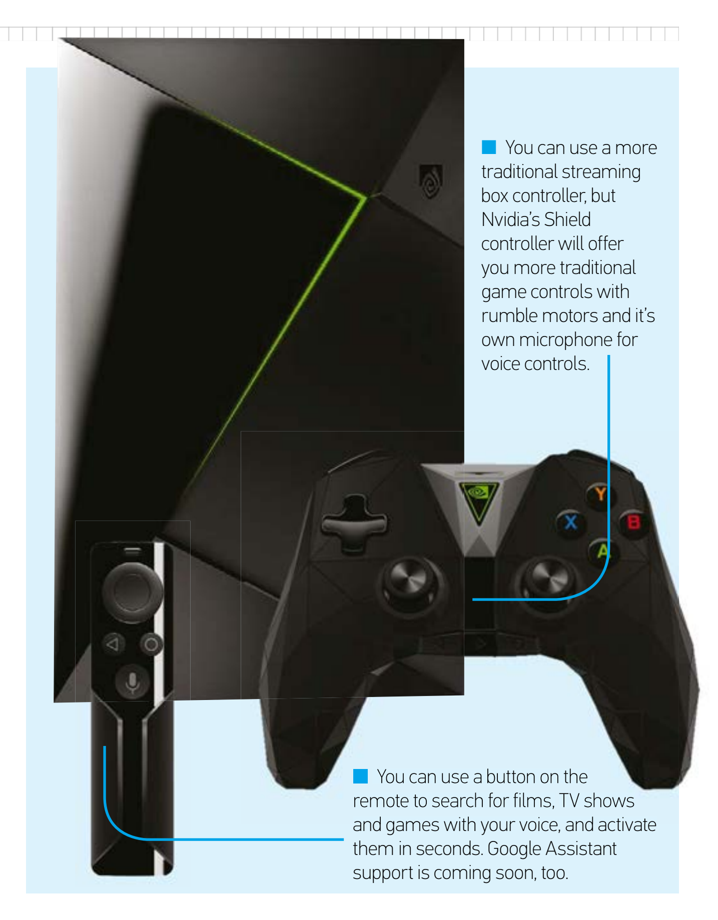
NVIDIA SHIELD TV PRO

SOLD BY: **NVIDIA** PRICE: **£279.99**

DO YOU HAVE a streaming box, like NowTV or Amazon's FireTV? They're great for movies and TV, but not so great for gaming. Nvidia is aiming to change streaming with the Shield TV, a streaming device that can do everything those devices can, with the added bonus of being able to play your favourite games.

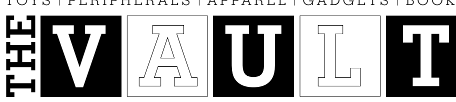
With it, you can stream games directly from your PC, allowing you to play HD and even 4K games, with their settings turned all the way up, on your TV. You won't need to compromise by moving to a console in the living room with this, as you can get the best quality in a comfortable environment.

Plus, if you sign up to GeForce Now for a monthly fee, you'll be able to stream games from the GeForce servers, allowing you to play all kinds of games without downloading anything, with up to four times the performance of a PS4. This kind of gaming delivery system has been tried before without success, but with a powerhouse like Nvidia behind it, this might just be the future of home gaming.
www.nvidia.co.uk



■ You can use a more traditional streaming box controller, but Nvidia's Shield controller will offer you more traditional game controls with rumble motors and it's own microphone for voice controls.

■ You can use a button on the remote to search for films, TV shows and games with your voice, and activate them in seconds. Google Assistant support is coming soon, too.





The book is focused on the sprites and artwork of games, with whole pages filled with just a few pixels. Don't expect a ton of description or commentary.

8-BIT

PUBLISHER: **EARBOOKS**

CAN YOU SEE the beauty in pixel art? Gamers of a certain age will certainly appreciate sprites, but in the modern world of 4K gaming, some younger gamers laugh at *Mario*'s original pixelated style. But we don't, which is why this celebration of 8-bit gaming was so exciting.

The book isn't especially text-heavy, with a brief introduction and some even briefer descriptions of the most famous games of the era. Each of these descriptions is written in both English and German, as the book was an original German publication, and the translations are excellent. The information here is really for those that haven't heard of games like *Bomb Jack* and *Circus Charlie*, as they don't go into any great depth, although there are a few featured games (such as *Super Mario Bros.*) that are discussed in more detail. Still, the main focus here is clearly on the artwork and sprites of each game. Full-page spreads and single pages are dominated by beautiful pixel imagery, with Samus standing tall on one page and Link's sword, bomb and hearts on another. At the end of the book is a photography section, documenting the many computers and console of the 8-bit era, and another featuring grids of sprites. It's a wonderful celebration of the artwork of early games for your coffee table – just don't expect an in-depth analysis of the games themselves.

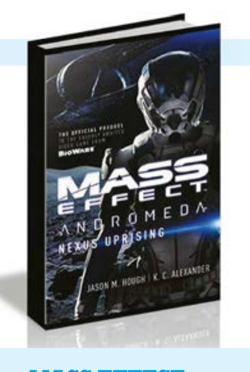
www.funstockretro.co.uk



THE ART OF HORIZON: ZERO DAWN

With this art book we have a chance to peek behind the curtain of Guerrilla's beautiful game. Its 300 sketches, images, and concept art will be sure to dazzle you as you explore *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s tech-heavy, post-apocalyptic world.

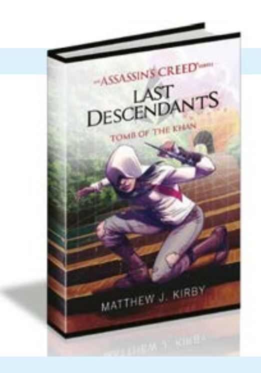
www.titanbooks.com



MASS EFFECT: NEXUS RISING

With a new *Mass Effect* game just a few weeks away, we've now been promised a trilogy of accompanying novels for the game. The first of these novels is *Nexus Rising*, and the trilogy will a story that runs alongside the game's narrative to add new depth.

www.forbiddenplanet.co.uk



LAST DESCENDANTS: TOMB OF THE KHAN

The extended *Assassin's Creed* universe continues to grow as this tale of friends torn apart by the hunt for a piece of Eden and growing allegiance to the assassin and templar orders. How much further can this universe be stretched?

www.amazon.co.uk



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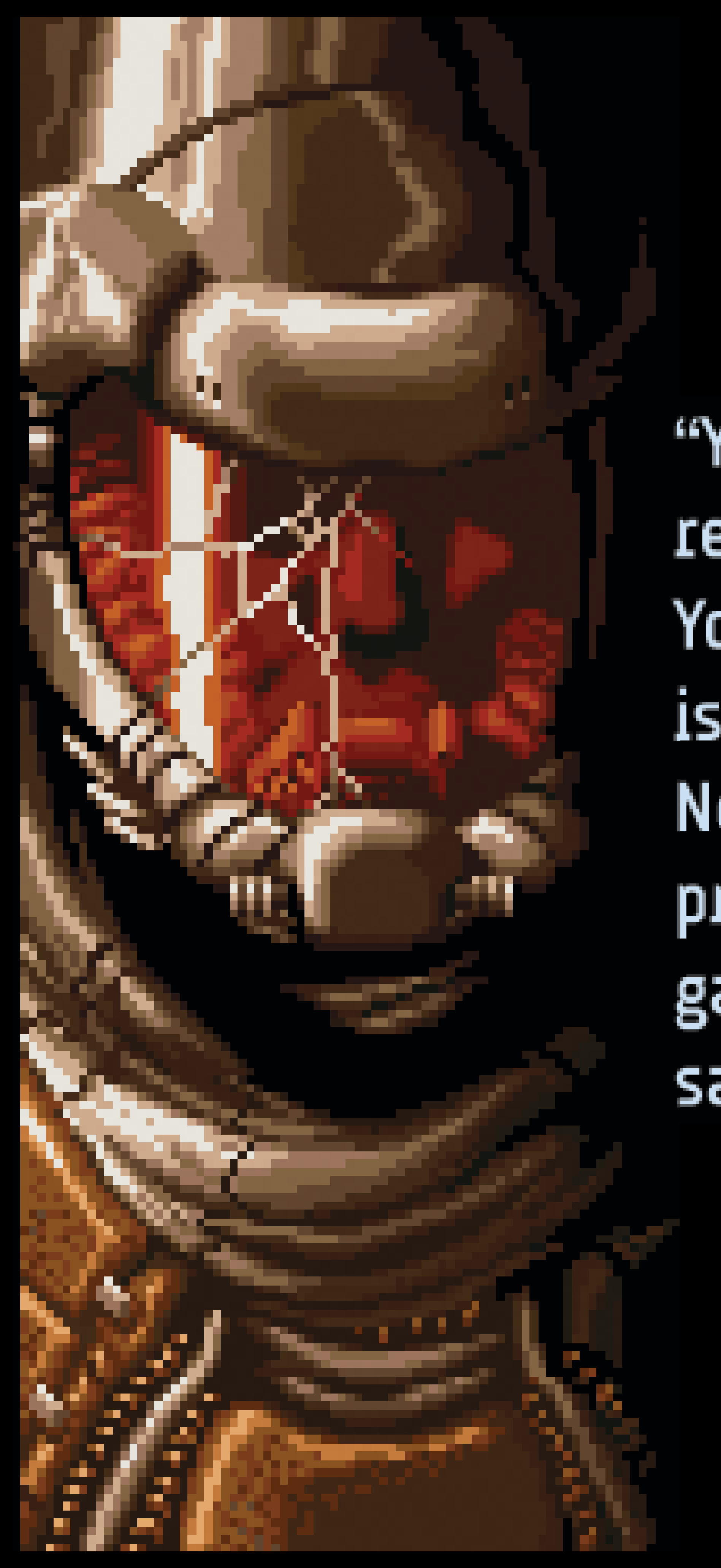


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